Check for updates

*Debate*

social compass

Social Compass
2020, Vol. 67(2) 315–322
© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0037768620917328
journals.sagepub.com/home/scp


# Secularisation theory and its discontents: Recapturing decolonial and gendered narratives.

## Debate on Jörg Stolz's article on *Secularization theories in the 21st century: ideas, evidence, and problems*

**Tobias MÜLLER**
Woolf Institute, UK
University of Cambridge, UK

**Abstract**

Secularisation theory has been a central element of research and teaching in sociology since the middle of the twentieth century. This article discusses the current state of the art in secularisation research through the perspectives of decolonial theory, global sociology, feminist theory and the experiences of minority religions. Responding to Jörg Stolz, the article argues that current secularisation research suffers from conceptual shortcomings regarding the socio-political implications of secularism and the secular, that the parochial nature of secularisation theory has led to its entanglement in modernist, catching-up narratives, and that a feminist perspective is necessary to provide more detailed accounts of the gendered nature of processes of secularisation, particularly regarding new religious movements and the religious transformations within minority religious groups. The article concludes that secularisation theory needs to take into account minority religious experiences, the religiosity of women and religion beyond Euro-America in order to understand the significant shifts in religiosity that remain overlooked by methodologies operating solely at the level of nation-states.

**Keywords**

Secularisation theory, decolonial theory, feminist theory, global sociology, Islam

**Corresponding author:**
Tobias Müller, Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, 7 West Road, Cambridge CB39DT, UK.
Email: tm498@cam.ac.uk

**Résumé**
La théorie de la sécularisation est un élément central de la recherche et de l'enseignement en sociologie depuis le milieu du 20e siècle. Cet article examine l'état actuel de la recherche sur la sécularisation à travers les perspectives de la théorie décoloniale, de la sociologie globale, de la théorie féministe et des expériences des religions en situation de minorité. En réponse de l'article de Jörg Stolz, ce texte soutient que la recherche actuelle sur la sécularisation souffre de lacunes conceptuelles concernant les implications sociopolitiques de la laïcité et du laïcisme, que la nature paroissiale de la théorie de la sécularisation a conduit à son enchevêtrement dans des récits modernistes de mise à niveau, et qu'une perspective féministe est nécessaire pour fournir des comptes rendus plus détaillés de la nature genrée des processus de sécularisation, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les nouveaux mouvements religieux et les transformations religieuses au sein des groupes religieux minoritaires. L'article conclut que la théorie de la sécularisation doit prendre en compte les expériences religieuses des minorités, la religiosité des femmes et la religion au-delà de l'Euro-Amérique afin de comprendre les importantes évolutions de la religiosité qui restent négligées par les méthodologies opérant uniquement au niveau des États-nations.

**Mots-clés**
Islam,sociologie globale, théorie décoloniale, théorie féministe, théorie de la sécularisation

Secularisation theory has been a central element of research and teaching in sociology since the middle of the twentieth century. Far beyond the question of religion, the assumptions and implications of secularisation theory permeate key problems sociology tries to understand, including transformations of economic, cultural, personal, and political relations. In a post-9/11 world, many hold religion to be the key challenge to what Jürgen Habermas calls the normative *Selbstverwiesenheit*, self-referentiality, of the project of modernity itself. Thus, the stakes of Jörg Stolz's (2020) Presidential Address to the International Society for the Sociology of Religion could have hardly been higher.

Stolz sets out to discuss secularisation theory's progress in addressing the questions: Did the world become more secular over the last two decades, and if so, how and why? Stolz explicitly limits the remit of his remarkable synopsis to quantitative studies that have appeared in the last two decades and focuses on seven areas where he identifies most significant progress. This provides us with a very rich canvas of several vibrant fields of statistical inquiry and a series of intriguing open questions. While recognising the genre-specific limitations of a Presidential Address, however, a couple of significant scholarly developments are notably absent.

In the following, I address the question how the quantitative secularisation research Stolz discusses could benefit from taking into account some pivotal developments in other fields of sociology, religious studies, and cultural studies. By this, I do not mean to tritely point out the need for a complementary overview of qualitative research, although this would certainly make for an interesting read. Instead, I propose to look at what

happens to secularisation theory when it engages with recent scholarship about the historical formations of our understanding of religion and how this is imbricated with certain epistemic and political hierarchies. Moreover, I argue that the 'contentious phase' of secularisation theory is far from over. To do this, I will sketch how three strands of research offer critical and constructive engagements with the secularisation research presented by Stolz. These concern (1) unresolved conceptual quandaries about religion and the secular, (2) the call to decolonise secularisation theory, and (3) the importance of gender and the role of religious minorities in Europe.

## Conceptual quandaries of religion and the secular

One of the central arguments Stolz advances is that after the 'neoclassical phase' of the secularisation debate, which he dates roughly from 1960 to 1985, and the 'contentious phase' from 1985 to 2000, we have overcome the latter with the turn of the millennium. The story he seems to tell is that from the 1960s to the 1980s, we were discussing abstract concepts, then we were empirically testing theories, and after 2000, we have been able to agree that while passing through a 'fuzzy' phase, religion is overall in decline. This diagnosis of a renewed consolidation of the secularisation thesis, however, disregards some of its most fundamental challenges that have been brought forward in the same period of time.

Talal Asad's (2003) *Formations of the Secular* shows that we cannot avoid the problem of how to understand the transformation of religion by an act of definition, for example, by making reference to 'transcendent reality' its defining feature, as Stolz proposes. Moreover, bipolar understandings of 'more or less religiosity' prevalent in secularisation theory is prone to neglect the ways in which the other, the rise of which we are trying to comprehend – the 'nones' or the 'secular' in secularisation – is fundamentally preconfigured by the ways in which we understand religion itself. Rather than simply being the other of religion, scholars in the Asadian tradition have argued that the secular needs to be understood as a principle that reconfigures social and political life. Secularism, in turn, needs to be understood not simply as a form of separation between religion and the state. Rather, broadly following Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil, secularism is a political project that redefines and transcends existing differential practices of the self that are articulated through class, race, gender, and religion. The debates around the ontological turn in anthropology highlight the problem that asking research participants about the frequency of religious practice or whether they believe in something the researcher declares to be 'transcendental' risks merely reproducing the culturally specific assumptions of the researcher. This mode of questioning is prone to ignore the underlying dynamics that make people (re)conceptualise their symbolic worlds as immanent or transcendent, or in terms that break down this binary. In order to understand these dynamics, Sindre Bangstad (2009) argued that we need to investigate the secular ethnographically as spatio-temporally specific 'local vernaculars'. In light of what could be called the challenge to vernacularise secularisation research, the question remains: What do contemporary developments in secularisation theory tell us about the secular?

One prominent way to think about this question is offered in Charles Taylor's (2007) *A Secular Age*, possibly the most surprising absence in Stolz's contribution. While

secularity I (secularised public spaces) and secularity II (decline of belief and practice) are a primary focus of quantitative secularisation scholars, Taylor's most decisive contribution, secularity III, has hitherto received little attention. Secularity III, the ontological awareness that my own view of the world is necessarily only one option among others, is of course difficult to measure empirically, let alone through quantitative methods. In fact, a survey on religion and its potential decline would be difficult to conceive of without an implicit commitment to secularity III. Thus, finding ways to empirically investigate the core arguments of one of the most influential books on secularisation in the twenty-first century remains a challenge to quantitative secularisation scholars.

Secularity III also points to another question that remains inadequately addressed, namely: What kind of religiosity is declining or on the rise? How do we investigate changes regarding the prevalence of different types of religiosity? While measuring the occurrence or frequency of different practices and beliefs offers some indication of the intensity and comprehensiveness of some religious forms over others, the tripartite schema religious-fuzzy-secular fails to account for significant religious transformations, for example the rise of very strongly committed or strictly observant religion. The increasing global significance, for instance, of Pentecostal Christians, Salafi Muslims, and Haredi Jews are arguably some of the most important contemporary religious developments. The 'consolidated' secularisation theory about the continuous decline of religion has little to say about the fact that due to its structural transformations, we might actually witness a resurgence of religion, at least in terms of its community-building functions, its political role, and its potentially lethal implications. Ironically, while methodologically flawlessly proving the decline of religion, we might fail to recognise the reasserted political significance we are witnessing through reinvigorated transnational activism, the war on terror, and religious nationalism.

## Decolonising secularisation theory

The tendency to neglect the political significance of the questions secularisation research asks and, more importantly, of those that are not being asked highlights the need to decolonise secularisation theory. Movements critical of the predominance of Northern Theory (Connell, 2007), which advocate Global Sociology (Burawoy, 2015), Decolonising Sociology (Bhambra, 2014), and Theory from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012) have become central social scientific concerns in the last two decades. Influential scholars such as José Casanova, Peter Berger, and Peter Beyer have urged us to let globalisation more seriously challenge the ways in which we do sociology of religion. Bryan Turner (2011) and Fareen Parvez (2017) argue that only through a Global Sociology of Religion can we overcome the Eurocentric, parochial nature of sociological theorising. Stolz recognises that the quantitative studies he discusses are almost exclusively concerned with Christianity and Western societies. However, the phrase 'western – and perhaps all – countries' (Stolz, 2020: 9) is indicative of our present epistemic, geopolitical constellation, in which data, theoretical models, and scholars of secularisation predominantly come from Europe and the United States. The 'majority world' is often only loosely included as anecdote, context, or extrapolation.

The parochial nature of much secularisation theory is often – implicitly or explicitly – justified by variations of modernist, catching-up narratives that cast non-Western countries as historically lagging behind. This becomes most evident in the model of secular transition. The movement to decolonise the social sciences seeks to uncover both the genealogies of these hegemonic conceptions of progress which are defined over and against a pre-modern temporality (that of the non-West) and the ways these reproduce Europe and the United States as principal loci of social theorising. Since the West represents a relatively small sample from a global perspective, the question arises what secularisation theory would look like if it centred on data and perspectives from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Mirjam Künkler and colleagues (2018) are a laudable exception trying to do precisely that. They seek to avoid variables such as 'belief in God' and 'church attendance' for their lack of cross-cultural validity. However, the quantitative analysis of their non-Western cases is only briefly presented in the book's appendix. Moreover, the indices used for secularity III (considering one's own worldview as only one option among others), which they broadly base on diversity and tolerance, fail to address the linguistic conflation of religion, spirituality, *din* and *dharma*, to name just the most prominent example.

Beyond the question of validity, Johnathan Z. Smith (1998), David Chidester (2013), and others (cf. Masuzawa, 2005) powerfully demonstrate how the term religion has continually been used as a conceptual tool that normalises 'Christianity as the prototype' (Bell, 2006: 29) and thereby relegates 'folk', 'nature', or 'other' religions to deviations that have little scholarly and political significance. This problem becomes increasingly acute when thinking about both the considerable size of 'fuzzy' religiosity and what we might sensibly say about the 'nones'. A key problem with the paradigm of Christianity as prototype is the frequently underlying assumption of the mutual exclusivity of different forms of religion and belief that is aggravated in non-Western contexts. For instance, multiple and potentially conflicting beliefs are built into many forms of experiencing the world in the Indian sub-continent and belief in the healing power of angels and dream catchers is widespread in Europe, not to speak of the transcendental character of attachments to the nation, ancestors, or other imagined communities. These proclivities are not necessarily mutually exclusive and are not captured by questions whether one identifies as religious, which is particularly evident in Japanese, Chinese, and Southern African contexts. A typical conversation with my interlocutors attending a Pentecostal church in London might illustrate this: 'Do you believe in witchcraft'? 'No'. 'Does it exist'? 'Yes'. The disparity between believing in something in the sense of a positive commitment (e.g. 'I am a Christian and I believe in God') and believing (implicitly) in a certain reality (e.g. 'I believe that evil spirits influence my daily life but I don't believe in these spirits') indicates a significant conceptual gap since my interlocutors would not consider belief in the Christian god and belief in witchcraft to be mutually exclusive. What could be interpreted as the fuzzy fidelity of my interlocutor, thus, might turn out to rather be the fuzziness of my conceptual apparatus that is inadequate to account for overlapping orders of transcendence and immanence, or the breakdown of this binary.

What is at stake here is nothing less than the question to what extent secularisation research is actually related to Max Weber's theory of disenchantment, or whether we are witnessing a transformation and *decentralisation of enchantments*, particularly, but not

exclusively, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This does not mean that there are no clear trends that quantitative secularisation research has convincingly identified. However, a decolonial perspective raises serious concerns about the limitations of what we are able to do with the methodological tools we are currently employing and what marginalisations and blind spots are produced in this process. A deep and critical engagement of non-Western data, concepts, and theory with the field of quantitative secularisation research is therefore still a desideratum of future research.

## Gender and religious minorities

Finally, a crucial development in the field of secularisation theory, even when this field is narrowly understood, concerns the role of gender and religious minorities. Linda Woodhead (2008) argued already over a decade ago that the central paradigms of the sociology of religion remain 'relatively untouched by an awareness' of the significance of gender (p. 189). Three staggering facts she mentions, that women are more religious than men, that women have been leaving churches at a faster rate than men, and that almost 80% of those practicing alternative spirituality are women, raise fundamental questions for secularisation theory. As feminist research continually demonstrates, social, economic, and religious life worlds are deeply shaped by gender hierarchies. Moreover, religious authorities are among the principal factors upholding patriarchal power structures across the globe. Analysing religiosity in the fields discussed by Stolz, including insecurity, education, and socialisation, without paying attention to the profoundly gendered nature of these spheres is bound to miss a key part of the picture. In addition, not ignoring potentially crucial explanatory variables, paying attention to gendered patterns of religiosity might also allow for a more differentiated understanding of which groups are experiencing what kind of religious transformation.

This is a problem not only with regard to gender but even more poignantly with regard to minorities, local idiosyncrasies, and particular religious groups, especially Muslims, which merit particular attention. Notwithstanding the Eurocentric remit of most secularisation theories, Islam seems to be the elephant in the room. While secularisation research has a lot to say about religion, it has surprisingly little to say about religions, understood as particular social groups in specific spatio-temporal contexts. Despite its role as 'Europe's second religion', in the statistical models presented here, Muslims seem to be either assumed to behave largely similar to non-religious or Christian respondents or to be statistically insignificant. However, when discussing the effects of insecurity, pluralism, and state regulation, the experiences of Muslims in Europe are potentially radically different from their non-Muslim counterparts. A vast body of literature has spelled out how Islamophobia, surveillance, preferential treatment of churches, and ideas of normative national cultures, for example, German *Leitkultur*, lead culture, are crucial in shaping the everyday experience of Muslims, and have potentially decisive effects on their religious practice (see Müller, 2017). This opens the question: Why has secularisation research not adequately taken minority religions into account and what would doing so contribute to more nuanced and politically reflexive theoretical models?

This article's criticism of conceptual fuzziness regarding the secular and its argument in favour of decolonial and feminist perspectives suggests that the contentious phase of secularisation theory is far from over. Rather, it seems we are in the thick of it. The Presidential Address certainly succeeded in providing an exciting overview of the advancements of secularisation research, sparking critical reflection on the state of the discipline, and pointing towards promising areas of future research.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Teije Donker, James Cochrane, and Thandeka Cochrane for very valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. All usual disclaimers apply.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

Asad T (2003) *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bangstad S (2009) Contesting secularism/s: Secularism and Islam in the work of Talal Asad. *Anthropological Theory* 9(2): 188–208.

Bell C (2006) Paradigms behind (and before) the modern concept of religion. *History and Theory* 45(4): 27–46.

Bhambra GK (2014) *Connected Sociologies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Burawoy M (2015) Facing an unequal world. *Current Sociology* 63(1): 5–34.

Chidester D (2013) *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff J and Comaroff JL (2012) Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa. *Anthropological Forum* 22(2): 113–131.

Connell R (2007) *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Künkler M, Madeley J and Shankar S (eds) (2018) *A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Masuzawa T (2005) *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Müller T (2017) Engaging 'moderates' against 'extremists' in German politics on Islam. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15(2): 55–65.

Parvez F (2017) *Politicizing Islam: The Islamic Revival in France and India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith JZ (1998) Religion, religions, religious. In: Taylor M (ed) *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 269–284.

Stolz J (2020) Secularization theories in the 21st century: Ideas, evidence, problems. *Social Compass* 67(2).

Taylor C (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Turner B (2011) *Religion and Modern Society: Citizenship, Secularisation and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woodhead L (2008) Gendering secularization theory. *Social Compass* 55(2): 189–195.

## Author biography

Tobias MÜLLER is a Junior Research Fellow at the Woolf Institute and a College Research Associate at King's College, University of Cambridge. He teaches political theory and contemporary religion at the University of Cambridge, where he received his PhD in politics and international studies. His research interests include twentieth century and critical political theory, feminist theory, political sociology, ethnographic methods, and secularism.
Address: Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, 7 West Road, Cambridge CB39DT, UK.
Email: tm498@cam.ac.uk