What causes Secularization?

Secularization is the transformation of a society from close identification and affiliation with religious values and institutions toward nonreligious values and secular institutions. In effect, it’s the relegation and compartmentalization of religion into being just one part of life, as opposed to being an all-pervading feature. Religion has dominated societies all over the world for hundreds of years and it hasn’t been until relatively recently, generally speaking, not until at least the twentieth century, that secularization occurred and religion began to lose its tight grip on certain societies. Nowadays, there are relatively clear trends in which countries are secular; they tend to be modernized, post-industrial nations with high levels of both human and economic development. Britain secularized as it underwent a much larger cultural revolution in the 1960s, which impacted people’s views on religion as well as women’s issues and civil rights.

There is a lot of debate over how secular individual countries are but to give a few examples; France, Germany, the Nordic Region and the low Countries, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Canada are all generally recognised as secular, largely because of their much-depleted Church attendance rates and lack of belief when asked in survey questions such as the World Values Survey. Non-secular countries are mainly Middle-Eastern and Asian Islamic countries as well as those African countries above the Sahara like Morocco and Egypt and some far-Eastern countries like Malaysia. Although the general global trend has been towards secularization there have been examples of the opposite happening; Iran became an Islamic Republic following its 1979 Revolution and Israel became the first Jewish State when it was founded in 1948. America’s status is rather complicated and it is widely disagreed upon as to whether it is Christian or secular. On the one hand, the First Amendment affirms freedom of religion, stating: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.’ This can be interpreted as separation between church and state, like in France, and there is indeed complete religious freedom in the United States. However, the reality is that Christianity is still crucially important to everyday life in the United States. The official motto of the United States since 1956, which features on every dollar bill, has been ‘In God we Trust’; Church attendance rates have stayed consistently high, despite falling in most other developed nations; And every single President and Vice President has been raised in a family with affiliations with Christian religions, except for Kennedy, whose Catholic background was hugely controversial during the 1960 election, a time when anti-Catholic prejudice was still very much in the mainstream of American life, and so Kennedy’s Catholicism hampered him and almost prevented him from being elected, whereas all other President’s Christianity was to their benefit. The importance of religion in American elections cannot be underestimated – it is practically unthinkable, even today, that a Presidential candidate would openly admit to having no faith. According to the Pew Research Centre, two-thirds of Americans say it’s important for the President to have strong religious convictions. Personally, I infer that America is still very religious and that religion does, to an extent, encompasses society and has not been relegated like in many other Western nations.
I am going to talk about several theories which attempt to outline various causes of secularization and hopefully by considering examples of individual countries and by looking at certain data, I will be able to suggest how accurate they are in and you will be able to form your own opinions. What causes secularization is not a singular thing, but a conglomerate of occurrences and situations which combine to affect the religious levels of each society, and there is variance between countries. There are two main types of theories – demand-side theories and supply-side theories. Demand-side theories suggest that as societies industrialize, almost regardless of what religious leaders and organizations attempt, religious habits will generally erode and the public will become indifferent to spiritual appeals. Oppositely, supply-side theories assume that public demand for religion is constant and therefore any variations in the vitality of religious life are as a result of its various supply in different markets. According to supply-siders, religious organizations and leaders play a strategic role in aggressively building and maintaining congregations. They state: 'If you build a church, people will come.'

Traditional secularization theory came about during the 18th century as part of the Age of Enlightenment. It was proposed by social theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim and although there is no specific or official definition, it essentially postulated that modernization of society would include a decline in levels of religiosity. William Bainbridge in his book “Atheism” says that secularization theory, in its simplest form, holds that social and intellectual progress is rendering religion obsolete. To an extent, these ideas have been realised, as can be seen in the list of secular counties. However, this theory falls short in its emphasis on rationality. Rationalism was thought to have rendered the central claims of the Church to be implausible in modern societies and therefore it was expected that this would cause religion to unravel as people stopped believing. In practice, this expectation was naïve because the concept of having faith encourages irrationality. Faith is defined as strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof. Therefore, people who have faith, do so not with enlightened rational thought and based on scientific evidence, but with overcredulousness and based on a hunch. The primary factor in determining a person’s religion is geography. Religion is like a language. We all speak English because we were raised in England. We didn’t evaluate all the languages of the world and then choose to speak the best one, speaking English has just always been a part of our environment and therefore we have adopted it ourselves. If choosing a religion to follow was based on substantial and convincing evidence, then everyone would be drawn to that far superior and more credible religion, but instead people are far more likely to simply adopt the religion they grew up with and therefore associate with, despite the irrationality of this. Is the reason that in 26 countries, over 95% of the population are Muslim because the claims of Islam are indisputably correct and more believable than any other religion, or is it because people tend to adopt the religion of their culture? As Richard Dawkins says, ‘How thoughtful of God to arrange matters so that, wherever you happen to be born, the local religion always turns out to be the true one.’ If the rational theory were correct, then those societies which express most confidence in science would be expected to be the least religious, but there is in fact no correlation between faith in science and religiosity. The Quran strongly encourages Muslims to study nature, to investigate
the truth and regards science as very important, yet most Muslims see no contradiction between believing that scientific advances hold great promise for human progress and believing in the existence of heaven and hell. Furthermore, some of the most secular countries, such as the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark are the most sceptical towards the impact of science and technology. Therefore, whilst there has proven to be a clear trend between modernization and secularization, proving that aspects of the traditional theory are accurate, it falls short in its overemphasis on the importance of increasing rationality in eradicating religion. Another flaw in this theory is that rarely does secularisation occur at the same time as industrialization. For instance, the industrial revolution in Britain began in the late 18th century, but it wasn’t until the late 20th century that we really begin to see secularization. We might expect that there would be a considerable gap between the two events, perhaps of a couple of generations, but the fact that it took hundreds of years does question the accuracy of this theory.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Ingelhart build on the traditional theory in their book ‘Sacred and Secular’, where they propose a more nuanced picture which places much more importance to rising levels of human development and personal security. Their Theory of Existential Security claims that the absence of human security is vital for high levels of religious belief; that the experiences of growing up in less secure societies will heighten the importance of religious values, while conversely experience of more secure conditions will lessen it. Inhabitants of poor nations remain highly susceptible to premature death, they are more at risk from natural disasters, they often have limited access to basic conditions of survival such as uncontaminated water and adequate food, have very limited access to basic healthcare and education as well as not having an adequate income. As a result, they have a much greater exposure to uncertainty and daily risks to their survival than inhabitants of rich nations, and this makes them more susceptible to the comfort and security provided by religion; Religion is often seen as a ‘holy safety net’. Their reliance on religion is greatly reduced after the first stage of societal modernization, which transforms the living conditions for many people. This theory prioritizes human development in countries over economic development. Although the two often come in tandem, there are countries with substantial national incomes, making them economically developed, but in which many inhabitants remain illiterate, malnourished or impoverished due to social inequality and government corruption. The results of the World Values Survey, taken between 1981 and 2001, supports the Theory of Existential Security by showing that citizens in poorer nations, who have much worse conditions of human security are far more religious than those in richer nations. 64% of people from Agrarian societies said religion is ‘very important’ compared to 34% from industrial societies and just 20% from post-industrial societies.

A large proportion of the remaining non-secular countries are Islamic nations and the influx of Muslim immigrants into Western Europe and America has noticeably increased levels of religiosity in these countries. One might therefore think that there is something inherent about Islam itself that prevents people and institutions of Islamic heritage from becoming secular. The Quran explicitly warns against the dangers of atheism. In Chapter 9, Surat at-Tawbah it says: ‘O Prophet, fight against the disbelievers and the hypocrites and be harsh upon them. And their
refuge is Hell, and wretched is the destination.’ However, it is unlikely that Islam itself is entirely responsible, as the Bible is equally disdainful of non-believers. Psalm 14 Verse 1 says: ‘The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile. If we consider the social and economic indicators of the major religions, it suggests that levels of economic and human development are again most influential. For example, the mean life expectancy in countries where the ‘main religion’ is or historically has been Protestant, is 66 years and the mean GDP is 14,700 dollars. Contrastingly in Muslim countries, the mean life expectancy is 61 years and the mean GDP is a mere 3,500 dollars. The mean Human Development Index for Protestant Countries was .764, whereas it was .594 for Muslim countries. According to the GINI Coefficient, there was also greater levels of inequality in Muslim countries than Protestant ones. This all supports the idea that people in countries with less human development, with lower levels of life security and life expectancy, with far less income and therefore certainty or ability to guarantee their own safety, are most vulnerable, and are as a result, more religious, as opposed to their defiance of secularisation being explicitly linked to their religion of upbringing. It is not that Islam itself is exempt from secularisation tendency, but that most of the nations with the lowest levels of human security happen to be Islamic.

The theory of functional evolution, which in many ways works in tandem with the two previous theories, originated from the seminal works of French sociologist, Emile Durkheim. Durkheim believed that industrialized societies are characterized by functional differentiation. This means that they consist of several subsystems and each of these systems is specialized to fulfil a unique function for society. Examples of subsystems are the political system, the economy, science, law, technology, education and, according to Durkheim, religion. This theory distinguishes between the two purposes of religion. One is as a system of beliefs and ideas. The other, which this theory is based around, is as a system of actions. The expansion of the welfare state during the late 19th and 20th centuries, meant that specialized professionals and government organizations replaced most of the tasks once carried out exclusively in Western Europe by monasteries, priests and parish Churches. Durkheim theorised that as a result of being stripped of their core social purposes, the residual spiritual and moral roles of religious institutions would gradually waste away in industrialized societies. Because almost all of the most secular countries, such as Sweden, the Netherlands and France also have the most extensive welfare states, there is strong evidence to suggest this theory is correct.

Clearly the demand-side theories carry a lot of truth in their interpretations of the declining levels of demand alongside modernization and increasing levels of personal security, but how are these levels affected by the supply of religion? Billy Graham was a prominent evangelist and Southern Baptist minister who became famous in the 1940s for his Christian preaching at indoor and outdoor rallies and his sermons, which were broadcast on TV and the radio. He is known as one of the most influential Christian leaders of the 20th century, having had a profound and incredibly widely felt impact on billions of people. According to his staff, Graham convinced more than 3.2 million people to ‘accept Jesus Christ as their personal saviour’ and it is estimated that Graham’s lifetime audience, including radio and TV broadcasts, was over 2.2
billion. This shows the importance of charismatic religious leaders in maintaining and even enhancing levels of religiosity. Therefore, it would seem logical that the reverse would also be true – that declining levels of religious supply and a lack of influential religious figures is a cause of secularization.

How does an excessive, rather than inadequate, supply of religion affect levels of religiosity in a society? This question brought about the Theory of Religious Pluralism, which has two interpretations. One outcome, which also originated from Emile Durkheim, who, believing that people would apply the newly discovered rational approach to investigate the credibility of religion, expected pluralism to erode faith, as the multitudes of religions and the impossibility of all of them being correct, would sow the seeds of doubt and cast scepticism on religion entirely. Supply-siders however believe that the increased supply of religion and the vigorous competition between them, would encourage increasing levels of religiosity, whereas the lack of competition in countries with monopolistic religions would lead to complacent clergy and empty pews, like in Scandinavia. In actual fact, there is little convincing evidence to support either versions of the Religious Pluralism theory and plenty which casts considerable doubt upon them. Catholic post-industrial societies in Italy and Ireland still have relatively high levels of religious belief, despite supply of religion being practically monopolistic. The 50 highly religious Muslim states have a mean score of .331 on the Religious Pluralism Index, whereas the 28 Protestant States, most of which are now secular, which have a mean score of .573. Both of these examples show that a lack of religious pluralism does not necessarily lead to secularisation. Then again, America is a prime example of a country with high levels of religious pluralism and high levels of religiosity. Essentially, there is no clear positive or negative outcome on levels of religiosity as a result of different levels of religious supply – casting doubt on the accuracy of supply-side theories. Furthermore, the inaccuracy of Durkheim in believing that religion would be affected by rational thought would suggest that a plurality of religions making each religion less likely to be correct, would have very little effect to people who have faith.

It is clear that there is no obvious singular cause of secularization. Most of the theories have shortcomings but this is hardly surprising when we consider a topic on such a global scale. The vastness of it is what makes not just secularisation, but secularisation theories a tendency rather than iron law. Roger Stark and Rodney Fink in their book 'Acts of Faith' conclude that ‘What is needed is not a simple-minded theory of inevitable religious decline, but a theory to explain variation’. Nevertheless, my interpretation is that demand-side theories tend to be more accurate and certainly more proven than supply-side theories. Whilst traditional theory is vague and not as nuanced as updated theories such as that of Existential Security, it’s difficult to deny that secularization has occurred most in those nations which are most developed, whereas its far easier to cast doubt on how crucial supply of religion is to levels of religiosity, considering the mixed examples of Italy and Ireland, and America.

There are several assumptions that are commonly made, and some which I have mentioned throughout this speech that perhaps we need to question. Is the world as secular as it is
commonly interpreted to be? And if it is, is this a good thing for society? Atheism is commonly viewed as void of morality and the structure and purpose to life which religion provides. A 2017 study for the Journal – Nature Human Behaviour - found that even atheists have a built in ‘anti-atheist bias’. Does this mean that secularisation is a bad thing for society? Do the benefits of modernization and increasing personal security that come alongside secularization outweigh the damage to society of losing the benevolence of religion? I think it’s important to remember that secularization is not the loss of religion entirely, it’s just the relegation of religion to a less prominent position within society, as opposed to encompassing society. Individual faith and the benefits of that can still continue.