

# The secularization thesis



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**It was Voltaire who said, ‘ If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him’. Our theory agrees. (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, page 23).**

These words uttered by Stark and Bainbridge back in 1987 offer a glimpse into the longstanding and heated debate between the previously dominant, the Secularization Thesis and the competing Supply Side Theory, in academic sociology. Both theories have profound implications for the future of religion as a force in society. This essay will look at two articles published in the *Sociology of Religion*. Firstly, this essay will look at the two competing theories of the Secularization Thesis and the Supply Side. Secondly, a summary of the main points of Stark's article entitled ‘ Secularization: RIP’ in 1999, and Bruce's 2001 response article entitled ‘ Christianity in Britain: RIP’ will be presented. Looking critically at both articles, this essay will conclude that Stark has won the debate for this around.

The secularization thesis dates from when the theory of development was at the high of its influence. The theory in its modern incarnation comes from the work of British sociologist Bryan Wilson in the 1960s. This twofold thesis was based on the observation that since the French and industrial revolutions in Europe in the 19th and 20 centuries have led to a decline in religiosity. Firstly, this theory used Modernity as an explanation for the exit of Christianity from the world. Secondly, this theory, would have the same effects on all types of societies. It saw the extinction of religion from an enlightened world. On the other hand, Supply Side Theory came to challenge the secularization theory in the 1980's. This theory aims to explain religiosity. Proponents believe that there is a constant potential human demand for religious goods over time and between societies. They believe that as the supply of these goods fluctuates, these fluctuations explain the

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different levels of religious vigour in different societies. Basically, the greater the religious diversity of a society, the better the religious vigour in that society.

As previously noted the secularization thesis theory has come under aggressive attack. Rodney Stark, then teaching at the University of Washington in 1999 published his article “ Secularization, R. I. P. in the Sociology of Religion journal. In this article, Stark clearly argues that the Secularisation theory, is out-dated, old-fashioned and, as the title of his article highlights, the theory is dead and should be left to rest in peace

Stark begins his article by noting, “[f]or nearly three centuries, social scientists and assorted western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion”. Stark makes five major claims about the thesis. Firstly, according to Stark, Modernity and modernisation is seen by theorists to be the cause of secularization. He notes that modernisation is a “ long, gradual, relatively stable process”, and that if secularization is the result of modernisation, there will be a corresponding “ long-term, gradual, and relatively constant trend of religious decline”. Secondly, to Stark, the focus of the predictions is on individual piety, especially belief, not institutional differentiation. He believes that some supporters of the secularization thesis have changed their focus and definition so they do not have to admit that their thesis is failed. In fact, Stark agrees religion institutions have less power and that religious ritual and symbols have become less common in public life. Starks third argument is that in all versions of the thesis the claim that “ of all aspects of modernization, it is science that has the most deadly implications for religion”. Fourthly, Secularization is irreversible. Nevertheless, Stark

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disagrees with this by noting Andree Greeley's 1994 comment that after 70 years of Soviet Union militant efforts to achieve secularisation " St. Vladimir has routed Karl Marx". Finally, Stark notes that the thesis applies globally. While the theorists have mostly focuses on Christianity, " belief in supernatural powers" is going to die out all over the world. Allah and Jehovah will both join each other as an " interesting historical memory".

Secularization, R. I. P., then gets into specifics. To Stark the secularization thesis has failed to be an accurate prediction due to six main reasons. Firstly, it is a myth that there has been a decline in religious belief and participation because " there has been no demonstrable long-term decline in European religious participation" and in Europe " levels of subjective religiousness remain high." Next, he argues that there has never been an " Age of Faith". To Stark most Europeans did not attend church during the middle Ages and during the Renaissance. In fact, he highlights that many clergy were incompetent and that clergy were often absent from their parishes. In addition, while there were " periodic explosions of mass religious enthusiasm", this offers even stronger evidence against involvement in organized religion. As a result, it can be said religious participation sometimes rises and sometimes declines. Thirdly, he argues that never was Europe really Christianized. Stark believes that although early Christianity was a " mass social movement in a highly competitive environment," it lost its energy after it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. After Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, there was never an attempt to convert the general population of Europe. This ties in to his fourth argument. Stark notes that while some theorists confirm there was no " Age

of Faith, to them people still had high levels of religious belief, even if they did not go to church. Stark believes, using secular Iceland as an example, this still applies today, noting that while Iceland only has 2 percent church attendance, only 2.4 percent of the country are atheists. Fifthly, "if secularization is to show up anywhere it must show up among scientists". However, Stark discovers that many scientists report being religious. Evidence that there is a conflict between religion and science is mostly fictional, and scientists are not "notably irreligious". Finally, Stark ends his rant about the fails of the Secularization theory by stating that evidence from Eastern Europe, Muslim nations and practitioners of Asian "folk" religions that modernity is compatible with religion.

In 2001, Steven Bruce, Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, responded to Stark, with the appropriately titled "Christianity in Britain, R. I. P.". Bruce disagrees with Stark's hypothesis that the secularisation is simply a myth, based upon underestimating the religious vitality of the world today. Furthermore, Stark argued that this myth also exaggerated the religiosity of the past age of faith. In order to refute Stark's claims, Bruce uses Britain as an example. Firstly, Bruce looks back at pre-industrial Britain. While knowledge of religion and its orthodoxy may have been limited, in order for there to be no golden age of faith we would have to be able to accept nine "sociologically implausible assumptions". These range from wondering if the most powerful national institution had little or no impact upon the people. To why would people allow such a large amount of the wealth of Britain go to this institution which they did not support. To Bruce, religious beliefs then were still far more pervasive and influential than they are now.

Next, Bruce looks at various indicators of the decline of Christianity in Britain over the last 150 years. Today, most Christian communities are in decline. Even if we just look to surveys done in 1951, 1990, and 2000 there is a clear trend of dramatic decline. Bruce goes as far to comment that using the long-term stable trend of the decline of Church membership and attendance, it is possible to make a statistical projection that by the 2030s the main Christian denominations will cease to exist. (Methodist). Bruce clearly believes that no amount of supply side revisionism will change the fact that Christianity in Britain is in serious trouble.

Bruce then takes a critical look at supply-side theories of religion, which argue that demand is constant and that levels of religious vitality therefore depend on the supply, which is greatest when there is a free and competitive market for providers. He asks that considering Christianity has always valued collective acts of worship, and if there is a free marketplace for religion and no lack of shortage of Christian organisations. Surely this should be expressed in some way. Bruce notes that while the New Age movement might appear to demonstrate the existence of widespread informal religious belief, perhaps of an “enduring need” for religion, his examination of the extent, nature, and significance of that movement suggests otherwise, noting that they are “numerically all but irrelevant”. The memberships of these new organisations do not sufficiently make up for those lost from the more traditional denominations, which are in danger of dwindling past the demographic point of no return.