

Charles Turner, *Secularization*, London: Routledge, 2019, 180 pp. \$37.56 paperback  
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Debates surrounding theories of secularization abound in the social scientific study of religion and politics. Whether or not modernization always and everywhere leads to the decline of religion is one of the foundational questions in sociology and numerous scholars have taken a firm stance for or against this idea. Some argue that religion is destined to disappear with the increase in pluralism, individualism, and scientific rationality that are presumed to come with modernization, while others point to the continued importance of religion in modern societies and the recent resurgence of religious fundamentalism as evidence that secularization theories are at best partial and at worst wholly inaccurate. And while most social scientists would agree that any universal theory of secularization fails to hold up to empirical evidence, Charles Turner rightfully asserts in his critical introduction to secularization that it “still hovers over the sociology, politics, and philosophy of religion” (85) in ways that require us to continually reassess the concept’s historical roots and its relevance for understanding religion and secularity today. While there are certainly numerous treatments of the history and impacts of secularization theory that one could draw on, Turner’s contribution to this literature is more than a simple history of the concept and its champions and detractors. Turner demonstrates a deep knowledge of classical sociologists, including Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel, and he puts these theorists and their conceptions of modernization and secularization into conversation in a way that the reader learns as much about the history of sociology more generally as they do about what these founders of sociology had to say about the fate of religion in the modern world. Turner quotes these theorists at length, comparing and contrasting their treatments of secularization in a way that will be accessible and interesting for both undergraduates new to sociological theory and seasoned scholars looking to get a fresh perspective. Turner also includes a chapter on foundational philosophical treatments of secularization, engaging in a similar comparative analysis of scholars like Karl Löwith, Eric Voegelin, Carl Schmitt, and Hans Blumenberg, which is often missing from the largely sociological histories of the concept of secularization. As this text is meant to be an introduction to the concept of secularization, Turner provides very little in the way of arguing for or against any one theory of secularization or moralizing about whether a loss of religion would be a good or bad thing for society. However, one clear argument is woven throughout the text—the need for ambivalence and relativization when dealing with theories of secularization. Turner believes that there is more to be found in classical sociological treatments of secularization than those

coming from scholars in the 1960s and onward—scholars like Bryan Wilson, Peter Berger, and Philip Reiff—because the classical theorists allowed for more ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt. As Turner puts it, “We should look to 19th century writers to understand the 20th century because they said something more complicated than 20th century writers, with its disciplinary boundaries and fixed assumptions” (21–22). He details how, if you only look on the surface of the writings of scholars like Marx or Weber, you may well find support for a straightforward theory of secularization, but if you dig deeper, you find important contradictions and concessions in their writings that upend common assumptions about their contributions to the secularization theories of the 20th century. Turner concludes that any sort of absolutism, either of the secular or of the religious, should be avoided if we are to truly understand the nature of religion in the modern world. In addition to a thorough review of both classical and contemporary theories of secularization, Turner provides a handful of historical case studies that illustrate the complexity of religion’s relationship with modernity, including a history of *laïcité* in France and how responses to the recent burqa ban and Charlie Hebdo killings are evidence of the continued legacy of French Catholicism or what he calls “zombie religion”, a history of the uneven secularization of Israel and the ways that Israelis have built “secular comfort zones” that coexist alongside a highly religious citizenry, and a history of secularization in Turkey and the ways that social class played a major role in the ways secularism was both accepted and rejected. In addition to these specific case studies, Turner spends almost an entire chapter describing the relationship between secularization and Islamic fundamentalism. He explains why fundamentalism in Islamic societies has been bolstered by secularizing forces, how much of this resurgence of fundamentalism has happened in urban areas despite assumptions about the secularity of cities, and the important differences between Islamic fundamentalism and Protestant fundamentalism. The attention Turner pays to these non-Western cases is a much-needed addition to secularization histories that often focus primarily on the U.S. and Western Europe. The one area of the text that I would have liked to see further developed was the final section on “secular religions”. In this section, Turner devotes only a few pages to describing the ways that totalitarian political systems, like Bolshevism, have been likened to religion and he argues that he disagrees with this kind of characterization. While he agrees there are similarities, including that these totalitarian political systems offer comprehensive worldviews, plausibility structures, and practices that resemble religions, he finds this kind of comparison sloppy and “pseudo-sociological” (144). I think there is some merit to this argument, but in his focus on politics over culture, Turner ignores important arguments in the now well-established

field of nonreligious studies about what religious-like nonreligious cultures—like atheist churches and secular solstice celebrations—mean for theories of secularization. Nonreligious scholars have contributed important critiques of secularization theories, not on the basis that religion remains important, but on the basis that nonreligion is more than just a hollow, rationalistic worldview devoid of meaning. I would have liked to see Turner address this new line of scholarship and the ways that the growing study of nonreligious cultures and communities provides a new angle into the concept of secularization. In the end, Turner delivers what he promises in this introduction to secularization, a “walking tour through the streets” of the theories and case studies of secularization that are important to social scientists. Along the way readers will learn about the numerous definitions of secularization, the key theories of secularization that inform social science today, and examples from around that world that show how secularization is rarely, if ever, a straightforward process, and certainly not a universal one.

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