

Book Review

Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society. By Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun. New York: New York University Press, 2023. 169pp. \$30.00 paper.

Can we still doubt secularization theory? According to Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, the answer to this question is a resounding “No.” In their book, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*, they argue that research in the last decades has accumulated empirical evidence unequivocally proving that modernization indeed leads to secularization—and does so all over the world.

The goal of the book is to provide a “book-length, in-depth defense of secularization—especially one that goes beyond the confines of Europe and the United States” (p. 15). A second goal is to “refute” the “decades-old claims of Rodney Stark and his colleagues” (p. 15). In this, the book largely succeeds.

It is a very well-written and engaging defense of secularization theory as applied to the world in general. The authors are able to show with EVS/WVS (the European Value Study and the World Value Survey) data that religious behavior, belief, and belonging have declined in many countries worldwide and that some often-cited alleged exceptions can, in fact, be explained in the framework of secularization theory. The book is fun to read and uses clear language and useful examples to support its points. The authors clearly take pleasure in introducing their theoretical opponents and their position. The main villain of the story is, of course, Rodney Stark (and he appears right at the beginning of the book in the guise of God). The overall thesis is sound, at least in the eyes of the present writer.

The authors are often at their best when they take on their theoretical opponents. Consider their description of the “moving the goalposts” fallacy: “Whenever a scholar asserts that secularization is happening, the ‘change not decline’ crowd point to a new specific example of someone doing something lived religion/invisible religion/spiritual-esque and assert that religiosity has just changed, not declined. When scholars like David Voas, Steve Bruce, or us [the authors of the book] muster evidence to challenge these claims, another head of the hydra pops up making the same claim over again but perhaps with a different example. It appears as though the ‘change not decline’ advocates continue moving the goalposts indefinitely when new evidence of religious decline is presented” (p. 45). This is well said; spirited arguments of this kind abound in the book.

Being so engaging, however, comes at a price. The authors do not just describe and explain secularization; they present their evidence with a passion that sometimes has an activist and secularist ring to it. Especially in chapters 4 and 5, readers are treated to long expositions stating that secular people are no worse than religious people in all kinds of respects. These explanations seem—at least to the present writer—unnecessary.

The book’s engaged style also leads to some substantive problems. Since the authors are keen on defending secularization theory against all kinds of opponents, they spend less time on essential problems that secularization theory grapples with.

For example, it is unclear how secularization theory should be theoretically formulated. The authors present a classic secularization theory (in the style of, for example, Steve Bruce) in which

“differentiation” and “rationalization” lead to “secularization.” But such a theory runs into serious problems already when trying to disentangle “differentiation” and “rationalization.” After all, rationalization is often thought to be the division of labor, but the division of labor is just another word for differentiation. Both concepts are inherently close to secularization itself. All of this is well known, and it could have been expected that the authors had stepped forward from this unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Another problem of the current secularization theory is how to test the causal claims often made. There are new causal analysis methods on the market, but they are mainly useful in very specific situations where “natural experiments” can be suspected. Again, the authors do not really make a step forward in this respect. Their overall theoretical model is not convincingly tested. If I understand correctly, they operationalize rationalization with GDP (gross domestic product) per capita and differentiation with inverse regulation and create four clusters showing that countries with high rationalization and differentiation are less religious than countries with low rationalization and differentiation. But such an analysis shows neither the causal influence of the assumed causes nor does it say anything about the relationship of the mechanisms involved.

Overall, the authors are much stronger at showing that there is indeed secularization in many countries of the world than at convincing us that modernization causes these processes. These criticisms aside, the authors have presented readers with a very clear and readable defense of the reality of worldwide secularization. As such, the book is an excellent contribution to current research in the sociology of religion.

Jörg Stolz 

University of Lausanne, ISSR, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csae052>