

Are atheism(s) and secularism(s) necessary outcomes of scientific thinking and the overall advance of modern science?

Introduction.

When considering if atheism and secularism are necessary outcomes of scientific thinking, we are essentially answering a question about the relationship between scientific progress and the decline of religion in society¹. Linda Woodhead summarises the view held by thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Nietzsche, Dawkins, and Freud, that as societies modernize, religion will decline. This modernisation and supposed progression is regarded as the necessary product of advances in scientific thinking which render religious metaphysical claims implausible and untenable for modern, rational thinkers. Anthony Wallace summarises this secularisation thesis: “belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world as the result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge”². As such, a direct correlation is drawn between the advances of science and the decline of religion.

However, this ‘advancing science, retreating religion’ hypothesis is not only a false rendering of the current global status of religion in spite of scientific advancement, but an overly simplistic explanation for why people chose to reject religion (atheism), and why religion has (particularly in the West) lost its authority and influence in our public and private lives (secularisation)³.

The failure of the Secularisation Thesis and the Conflict Thesis to explain the relationship between scientific progress and religion.

Despite the assumptions of many scholars such as Nietzsche that “God is dead”, and that we have killed him with our scientific revolution, or Comte’s suggestion that atheism and secularisation are inevitable (and desirable) in the face of the emerging scientific era, this has simply not happened; religion has sustained, and in some cases increased its influence despite the continued success of modern science to explain the world in natural terms. As Rebecca McLaughlin has argued, the secularisation thesis has received a “large scale empirical falsification”⁴, Christianity is predicted to grow from 31% in 2015 to 32% in 2060, while Islam is set to grow dramatically from 25% to 31%⁵. Therefore, John Hedley Brooke’s assessment that “the world today is massively religious” and “anything but the secularised world that had been predicted” is highly justified⁶. Science has advanced, but religion is not dead. Instead, it is on the rise in spite of the continued progression of scientific thinking and discoveries. This has the implication that science and religion are not at war in the way that Thomas Henry Huxley supposed; science and religion do not compete for the same territory, and thus advancements of science do not, and have not correlated strongly to the retreat of religion⁷. Of course, advancements in science have contributed to a general demystification of the

¹ John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’ in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) 103.

² John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’, pg. 106.

³ John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’, pg. 104.

⁴ Rebecca McLaughlin, ‘Why the Secularization Hypothesis is Fundamentally Flawed’ (2019)

⁵ Pew Research Centre, ‘The Changing Global Religious Landscape’ (2017)

⁶ John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’, pg. 105

⁷ Michael Ruse, ‘Atheism, Naturalism, and Science: three in one?’ in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) pg. 230

world and have made religious beliefs such as creationism and “out-and-out biblical literalism”⁸ untenable, but this should not lead us to the false conclusion that science and religion are in perennial conflict in which it is necessary that only one victor will or can emerge.

It has been suggested that the advancements of science need not be in conflict with religion since science and religion can coexist either because they are independent entities, or because they can be integrated together. Stephen Jay Gould suggests that science and religion are “non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA) in which cohabitation is possible since religion and science answer different questions. As Langdon Gilkey summarises, science answers what, religion answers why⁹. Alternatively, as Ian Barbour and Ruse argue, science can be integrated into religion, using the examples of natural theology, theology of nature, and dialogue through methodological overlap. The question of whether the integration between science and religion, or independence of these two areas is convincing is beyond the scope of this essay. However, what becomes clear is that science and religion need not be perceived as in conflict. Indeed, many believers see their faith as untouched by the supposed encroachments of scientific discoveries, holding on to the experiential aspect of their religion and its ability to answer the “limit questions” that science cannot touch¹⁰.

Complexity Thesis – Atheism

Where faith has faltered, this is often explained by a variety of factors, and not simply the displacement of religious explanations of the world with metaphysical naturalism. We have only to look at the biographies of some of the most influential 19th century scientists to uncover that what led to atheism was theological, not scientific¹¹. Darwin is said to have rejected religion because he could not accept the idea of *κόλασις αἰώνιος*, and particularly that his non-Christian father would be condemned to eternal torment. It is highly significant that Darwin’s antipathy to religion sprung from the rejection of this “damnable doctrine” rather than from the roots of scientific thinking¹². Darwin further writes of his sensitivity to the problem of evil in the face of personal tragedies and inability to accept the concept of divine revelation, attacking the ignorance of the gospel writers and the “peculiar relationship between the Old and New testaments”¹³. Darwin’s biographical testimony serves as a clear demonstration of the fact that the loss of personal faith is often complex and explained by factors other than science. Indeed, Brooke sites a survey that covered the biographies of two hundred non-believers between 1850 and 1960, in which science was hardly mentioned at all as a motivation for atheism¹⁴. Thus, the personal drive to reject religious doctrine is often better explained by theological and ethical disagreements with religion, rather than the challenging deliverances of science such as evolutionary theory and neuro-psychological explanations for humanity’s religious impulse¹⁵.

What’s more, the impact of the rise of a historical reading of the Bible has played a significant role in the proliferation of unbelief. In particular, the efforts of German scholars such as Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) to rediscover the context in which the gospel writers interpreted the life and death of Jesus Christ has served to render the Bible as a product of its time and culture, rather

⁸ Michael Ruse, ‘Atheism, Naturalism, and Science: three in one?’ in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) pg. 241

⁹ Michael Ruse, ‘Atheism, Naturalism, and Science: three in one?’, pg. 231.

¹⁰ John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’ in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) pg. 109

¹¹ Michael Ruse, ‘Atheism, Naturalism, and Science: three in one?’, pg. 236.

¹² John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’ pg. 111.

¹³ *Ibid.* pg. 111

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 111

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 2007) pg. 4

than from the timeless authority of infallible Gospel writers. Indeed, it is interesting that the idea that the Bible should be read historically, outlined in *Essays and Reviews* (1860) caused more vehement rejection among the English clergy than Darwin's *Origin of Species* published only two years prior. Therefore, as Brooke suggests, "internecine disputes within religious bodies have arguably been more damaging to their authority than attacks from outside"¹⁶.

In summary, as tempting as it may be to suggest atheism is simply the product of doubt insinuated by scientific advancements, exposing religion as primitive and childish, the personal rejection of God (atheism) is much more complex and is often better explained as emerging from internal theological disagreements and the impact of the modern-historical reading of scripture than from scientific thinking.

Complexity Thesis - Secularism

Additionally, Secularism is much more complex than simply the necessary outcome of the advancements of modern science. The proliferation of secularism may be partially explained by an increasing scepticism towards Christian truth claims on the grounds that scientific naturalism serves as a better metaphysical explanation for the world as it is. However, the perception of religion as at odds with the principles of modernity such as tolerance, equality, and democracy better serve to explain why secularism has flourished in Britain, and in the West more generally. The principle of freedom to make choices about how to live one's life is an idea that has proliferated in the West and undermined the paternalism that has nourished religion for centuries. Given the focus on personal liberty within secularism, it is not surprising that France is programmatically secular, as this appears to align with the principles of 'liberty, equality, fraternity'. Moreover, the Church has increasingly become regarded as outdated and illiberal. The Church of England's exemption from "laws which prevent other public bodies from discriminating on the basis of gender, religion and sexuality"¹⁷ starkly demonstrates how Christianity is at odds with the tide of change towards liberalism in the West. The Amsterdam Declaration of 2002 sets out secular humanism as a necessary system which supports democracy, human rights, and personal liberty. Therefore, arguments for secularism are made on the grounds that the removal of religion from society is essential for democratic equality and the freedom of expression, not on the grounds that religion is unconvincing in the face of scientific discoveries.

Moreover, as Woodhead, Charles Taylor, and Peter Berger have argued, cultural pluralism is a vital factor for the emergence of secularism in modern societies¹⁸. As Taylor identifies, modern society is typified with the increase of diversity and multiculturalism. These challenge "taken-for-granted" cognitive frameworks and traditions¹⁹ which leaves faith as "a condition of doubt and uncertainty"; "belief in God is no longer axiomatic" since "there are alternatives"²⁰. Not only does pluralism explain the increased ethic of tolerance and respect for 'the other' and for different religious practices, but for the increased epistemic uncertainty in the modern era. Indeed, this is characteristic of post-positivism and explains the growth of agnosticism and scepticism against religious absolutism. As Woodhead addresses in her analysis of the rise of 'no religion', or 'nones' in Britain, this need not be associated with the loss of personal belief (atheism), (interestingly only 41% of 'nones' identify as

¹⁶ John Hedley Brooke, 'Science and secularization' in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) pg. 112

¹⁷ Linda Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority'. *Journal of the British Academy*, 4, 245–61. (2016) pg. 256

¹⁸ Linda Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain', pg. 254

¹⁹ Linda Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain', pg. 254

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 2007) pg. 3

atheist²¹) but with a general agnosticism and refusal to fit into religious categories. This sort of epistemic humility and scepticism marks a paradigm shift from the absolutism of religious claims and is explained by the transformation of modern society from inward looking naivety to outward looking plurality.

In summary, Not only are there many other factors that contribute to the emergence of secularism in the West, but these factors (cultural pluralisation and ethical liberalisation) are *better* explanations of the modern secularising impulse. As such, we ought to, as Brooke suggests, “reconsider the formula that science has been the primary cause of an irreversible secularisation”²²

Naturalistic explanation of religion

Scholars such as David Hume, Daniel Dennet, and Edward O. Wilson have argued religion can be explained solely in naturalistic terms, suggesting that this will render religion untenable, and thus necessitate atheism and secularism. Wilson summarises this view, writing that “the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competition as a wholly material phenomenon”²³. Both Dennet and Wilson attempt to characterise religious belief as a biological “by-product”, while Dawkins, with his concept of ‘memes’ explains religion as a cultural heredity. However, these arguments are flawed in their suggestion that a naturalistic explanation of religion renders religious claims false. Just because you can explain something, this does not make it false. Indeed, Ruse uses a vivid example of the human eye: just because we might be able to give an evolutionary explanation of the eye, this does not render the flower that it perceives as false. Therefore, this attack must be dismissed; naturalistic explanations of the cognitive science of religion do not challenge the veracity of religious claims.

Conclusion.

So far, we have refuted the claim that atheism and secularism necessarily emerge from the advances of modern science. While scientific thinking may have encouraged the spread of metaphysical naturalism (even if this is not the intention of methodological naturalists), Brooke and Ruse’s suggestion that we must avoid the temptation to draw a simple correlation between the rise of science and the decline of religion is acutely accurate; the emergence of atheism and secularism is best explained by a variety of contributing factors.

²¹ Linda Woodhead, ‘The rise of ‘no religion’ in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority’. *Journal of the British Academy*, 4, 245–61. (2016) pg. 250

²² John Hedley Brooke, ‘Science and secularization’ in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) pg. 105.

²³ Michael Ruse, ‘Atheism, Naturalism, and Science: three in one?’ in Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge, 2010) pg. 239

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