

**Book Review:**  
***Secularization and Its Discontents,***  
**by Rob Warner**

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In *Secularization and Its Discontents*, Rob Warner (2010) surveys the wide range of views on secularization theory, which proposes a causal link between modernity and a decline in various aspects of religious belief and practice. By blending lasting contributions from classical social theorists with current empirical findings and theoretical developments, Warner aspires to provide a comprehensive guide for readers wanting to study the interaction of religion and social change.

The first three chapters lay out the key premises of secularization theory and how it has been disputed. In the first chapter, Warner introduces and critically evaluates classical forms of secularization theory, drawing on early theorists like Durkheim, Weber, Comte, Marx, Bruce, and Wilson. While Warner addresses key concerns, such as the unusual case of the United States and if religious pluralism really is secularizing, his claim that classical secularization theory leaves many questions unanswered is sometimes unconvincing. For example, he asks whether secularization is reversible and whether it is merely a Christian, European phenomenon. Far from being unanswered, previous theorists have shown that with the exception of the United States, a decline in various aspects of religion has occurred throughout the industrialized world; furthermore, they have argued that reversal is unlikely given that religious belief and practice are sustained through social interaction and agreement (e.g., [Bruce, 1996, 2002](#)).

Having asserted that secularization has not affected all dimensions of religion, in Chapter 2, Warner consequently presents a modified version of secularization theory that focuses on the decline in religious participation, institutional belonging, and public influence (cf. Martin, Davie, Casanova, Hervieu-Léger). Warner appears to favor this approach as it provides a synthesis between key premises of the classical theory and current empirical findings. The third chapter then examines emerging arguments of scholars who reject the secularization theory entirely (e.g., Stark, Finke, Stephen Warner, Iannaccone). Employing the theory of the religious economy and rational choice theory, they assert that, like other businesses, religious institutions compete in a market of supply and demand in which an inherent need for religion keeps demand constant and consequently makes secularization unattainable.

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Instead, religious consumers choose the religious goods and services that best meet their needs. Warner sensibly argues that although this approach offers important insights, particularly in the case of the United States, it fails to account for the lack of spiritual exploration in Europe following the decline of Christianity.

The second half of the book draws on the theories presented in the earlier chapters to explore current trends in the study of religion, specifically whether or not a contemporary spiritual revolution has taken place, the attractiveness of conservative religious movements, and trends in the popularity of Protestantism relative to Roman Catholicism. Here, Warner argues that there has not yet been a significant revival of spirituality, but also that the end of religious belief has been exaggerated. As it stands, Warner's description of recent patterns is largely based on Anglo-American observations; further examples from other nations could have enhanced these chapters.

The literature on the secularization debate is often rather polarized. Consequently, a merit of this book, and particularly of its first three chapters, is that it discusses both sides thoroughly, allowing the reader to see the full range of arguments. While Warner does not explicitly persuade the reader to embrace a specific position in the debate, he by no means assumes a neutral stance. Unfortunately however, Warner's own position is often obscured amidst his summaries of other scholars' ideas. Nevertheless, Warner's comprehensive overview is an important contribution and a useful guide to students and academics finding their way through the extensive positions and ideas within secularization theory.

## References

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