

## The Secularisation Thesis

Podcast with **Linda Woodhead** (16 April 2012).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson**.

Transcribed by **Martin Lepage**.

Audio and transcript available at

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/podcast-linda-woodhead-on-the-secularisation-thesis/>



**David Robertson:** *The secularisation thesis is probably the biggest central theme and certainly the most hotly debated in the sociology of religion, certainly since the 1960's. Why is it so important and how has it changed? To talk to us today about this, we've got Professor Linda Woodhead, from the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University. Perhaps, you could just begin at the beginning with where does the secularisation thesis come from? Where does it begin?*

**Linda Woodhead:** Actually, the origins of secularisation theory are coterminous with the origins of sociology itself. It's absolutely fundamental to the whole discipline and all the great fathers of sociology – Weber, Durkheim and Marx – believed and expounded some version of secularisation theory. At the very heart of the social sciences, this belief that, as societies modernized, religion will decline. And each had a different way of explaining that. For Weber, it was primarily about the rise of scientific knowledge and it was about the application of rational standards, bureaucratic standards, in life more generally. He thought that that way of thinking and reasoning disenchanting the world, it cast out the magical, the religious. Durkheim had a rather different explanation of why religion declines. He thought that religion binds societies together, and he particularly thought that religion binds small groups together, and they meet face to face and celebrate the sacred. He thought that as societies modernized and urbanized, those fundamental bonds are broken, and religion is broken in that process as people move to cities and are individualized more. And Marx thought, of course, that religion would die out once you get the perfect socialist communist State. He thought it was a symptom of all that was wrong with society, a way of coping with the oppressions and difficulties of society. Once we realised the perfect society, you won't need religion. In different ways, all of those classical theories are evolutionary or they're progressive.

**Citation Info:** Woodhead, Linda, and David G. Robertson. 2012. "The Secularisation Thesis." *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 16 April 2012. Transcribed by Martin Lepage. Version 1.2, 25 September 2015. Available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/podcast-linda-woodhead-on-the-secularisation-thesis/>

**DR:** *I was going to ask that. Are they strongly tied to this notion of the gradual perfection of society and the move out of the darkness and into the light?*

**LW:** They are really, and that's a kind of, in a way, a blind spot of classical secularisation theory, in modern forms, that they didn't really, perhaps... they weren't sociological enough about their own background and presuppositions. This early crop of the classical theories, are all bound up with Nation-States developing, growing, extending their power and with their new elites, including academic elites, like the sociologists establishing their status. There was a kind of implicit optimism that the way that European society is developing is at the cutting edge of social evolution. So all societies are going to follow, so eventually everyone will become secular like we are. That's never quite said, but that really does lie behind this theory. That we are not just talking about the tie of religion and particularities of here and now, we're talking about an inevitable, inextricable process that everyone is destined to go through.

**DR:** *That's a critique of the narrative of modernization and westernisation anyway, that this is inevitable and even desirable motif. Maybe we can move on to the... I don't want to call them the classical theorists, but the most famous describers of the secularisation thesis in the simple form that we know it.*

**LW:** You could say that those classical sociologists, Weber, Durkheim, Marx, are sort of phase one of secularisation. And then there's been a phase two. Phase two came in the wake of the Second World War, really. It was really flourishing in the 1970's, and around about then. Again, it was very much European. In the UK, one of the chief figures was Brian Wilson, of Oxford University. (5:00) He fully endorsed secularisation theory, he gave it thoughts of new twists and explanations and interpretations. He particularly emphasised that secularisation is about the decline in the social significance of religion. He didn't deny that some people were still religious, but he said "what's changed, is that religion doesn't have the same status in society. For example, politicians don't have to refer to it anymore. They go on and do their business according to their own logic, they don't take any notice of religion, whereas before the political ruler and religious elites would have to be in compensation with each

other. He talked about that in every sphere, how religion ceases to be a point of reference in the public life.

**DR:** *Perhaps you could clarify that, that sounds like the first development of the secularisation thesis, isn't it? It's one of the explanations for it, that it's not that religion is going to completely disappear from society, rather it moves out of public sphere and into the private sphere.*

**LW:** Yes. He thought that was that. You could still be devoutly religious, but it will affect you in your private life rather than when you go to work, or when you're being a politician or wherever that might be.

**DR:** *It's not a disappearance of religion, it's just a radical change in its function?*

**LW:** Yes, the sociological term is social differentiation. The different spheres of society become autonomous. In law, you don't refer to religion anymore, and in politics, likewise, and in education likewise. All these things become autonomous and they run according to rational secular standards, not by reference to religion. Wilson thinks he sees that happening very clearly in the UK and gives lots of examples of that process in various spheres.

**DR:** *Were there any other interpretations of the secularisation thesis?*

**LW:** There were lots of clarifications at that time. There was another very important contribution by a European, a Belgian sociologist, called Karel Dobbelaere, and he made what's become really well used in his account, is a distinction between three levels of secularisation. He talks about secularisation at the societal level, the meta level of society; secularisation at the organisational level, and he's thinking in part of religious organisation themselves declining, like the churches having fewer members or attenders; and then thirdly, secularisation at the personal level, where fewer people believe or their lives are less guided by religion. He says : "Don't just talk about secularisation. What sort are you meaning, or what level of society? The macro level, the meso level or the micro level?" And he thought that it could happen at different rates in different parts. That's quite compatible with Wilson's theory,

really. It's another clarification of secularisation theory. But the most important current exponent, still in post, is, of course, in Scotland, and that's Steve Bruce at Aberdeen University, who's probably the most important defender of secularisation theory now, even though it's waned very very much, it's very much fallen out of favour in the last ten or fifteen years. Steve is a true believer still in secularisation theory and defends it very very strongly. He combines really particularly Durkheim and Marx. He thinks that it is about individualisation, the Durkheimian theory that societies break down and we don't need that bond anymore, and he thinks it's about rationalisation, the more Weberian account and he restates it, but in those quite classical terms, and he accumulates a lot of data, and the data mainly has to do with Churches in Europe. So it's about the demonstrable decline in the number of people who are members, attenders, who had their child baptised, who have a Christian wedding. There are lots of statistics that support his case, that he regularly cites.

**DR:** *That's a weakness of secularisation thesis, isn't it? That it's based on a very strict model of what religion is, on an institutionalised Church model of religion. And it wouldn't really translate to less institutionalised forms of religion, say New Age.*

**LW:** That's a very good point, and Steve Bruce would reply to you, because he is criticised for that point, by saying New Age isn't really a religion. He would say it's just what he calls it, cults. It's the kind of... like an entropy, (10:00) when religion get less and less and less important to people and New Age is just the very end of that process. It doesn't really matter to them, it doesn't have a big effect on their lives, they don't give a lot of money to it, they're not really committed, it's just a sort of privatised leisure pursuit. That's how he tries to explain new forms of spirituality's growth. Is that convincing from your point of view?

**DR:** *Not convincing to me, but I can follow his argument. We could get into a big debate about whether or not... you could argue that something like New Age is a different form, a more individualised rather than an institutionalised model of religion, for instance, in which case secularisation would be a change in the form of religion, which would go along with an individualised privatisation model.*

**LW:** But you could say, in criticism of someone like Steve Bruce, you wouldn't, say you're looking up modern communications, you wouldn't get the statistics for how many people send telegrams from 1950 to 2012, and say, "Well, it's completely declined, so people don't use instant messaging anymore". You'd look at what new forms have taken its place, so why just look at the churches? Of course some forms of religions grown declined over time, because religion is constantly transforming. So why say that's the only true religion and nothing else counts? And I personally think that's a major weakness of the secularisation theory, which is only... if we're looking at something very specific, the decline of particular sorts of European Church that had close connections with the State, and they have declined their question. They generalized from that very particular story to religion as a whole.

**DR:** *Which is a perfect link to the second major weaknesses, I think, of the secularisation thesis, which is, it's very culturally and geographically specific.*

**LW:** That's a great point and that brings us to the USA, because you'll notice that all the theorists I've been talking about are European. And Europe is in many ways the most secular part of the globe. America never produced secularisation theory in a significant way partly because, even though America was as modernised as Europe, it didn't suffer the same decline of religion, even of church going or congregation, they have different kinds of churches in the States of course. So Americans didn't really believe in it, in the way Europeans did.

**DR:** *It was never really accepted?*

**LW:** It didn't have the same theoretical importance. It was accepted by many social scientists, but in the study of religion, there aren't great theorist of it who contributed new developments. And since the 1980's, the most important critics of secularisation theory have been Americans in the sociology of religion. First, Peter Berger and then Jose Casanova. Berger's particularly interesting because he was a secularisation theorist. So his career has spanned right from the 1960s through to today, for much of that carrier, he went along with the

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Version 1.2, 25 September 2015

European secularisation theorists. But his interpretation was different. He thought religion declines because it becomes less plausible when there's not just one worldview. So if you're a Christian and you just live in a Christian village near a Christian town, you're going to believe it. But it becomes less plausible when you meet an Hindu and a Buddhist. That was his theory of why it declined in modern societies. But then he had a complete conversion, he changed his mind in the 1990's, and he said... I brought a quote, it's a good one. He said :

“My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists, loosely labeled secularisation theory, is essentially mistaken. In my early work, I contributed to this literature. I was in good company. Most sociologists of religion had similar views and we had good reasons for upholding them. Some of the writing we produced still stand up. Although the term ‘secularisation theory’ refers to works from the 50's and 60's, the key idea can be traced right back to the Enlightenment. The idea is simple. Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. And it's precisely this key idea that turned out to be wrong.”

So a very strong change of mind, in his part.

**DR:** *It's rare to see a scholar doing that.*

**LW:** It's very rare and it's particularly interesting. Then Jose Casanova had developed a very sophisticated theory of public religion which accepts that there's differentiation, but it thinks religion continues to a public and not just a private role and he shows that **(15:00)** in relation to Poland and Spain and several other countries.

**DR:** *Poland is a very good example. It's obviously... the figures in Britain alone since the arrival of the Poles here shown a huge growth in church attendances. I think it was Casanova, I might be wrong, who argued that it was because the Church wasn't*



*identified with the controlling power but the Church was rather a revolutionary... that's a bit strong, but... of the people, and that the Church hasn't gone into decline in Poland as it has here. And where the Church is still seen as, perhaps, I think, cultural hegemony. I think those statistics have a very interesting thing to say about secularization.*

**LW:** Yes, so the difficulty is to explain why the differential rates of secularization. Actually, I was going to come to the other kind of key figure who's really the stand out figure in this whole story. He's the one person who saw all this a long time before anyone else, long before Casanova or Berger, and that was David Martin, who's an English sociologist of religion, still alive, retired now. In 1965, he wrote an essay criticizing secularization theory, and then in the late 1970's, he wrote the famous book called *A General Theory of Secularization*. He didn't completely throw it overboard, but he tried to refine it, and his point was just what you said. That it depends what role religion has in a particular society and what relationship it has to reactionary and revolutionary political power. So in a country like France, where all forces of liberalization and democracy who have opposed by the Catholic Church, you get a very very strong secularism. Because all progressive people want to overthrow this reactionary force. But, going across the Atlantic to America, where the churches were a force of democracy and liberation from colonial British rule, then religion becomes identified with those positive forces and it's a very religious place. And he thinks he can do similar analyses across the world. So he rejected the general theory, an undifferentiated theory, long before anyone else. I think he gets sometimes slightly irritated today when everyone says "Oh, it's a really great new theory!" He thinks "I was saying that forty years ago."

**DR:** *But it's interesting that that's, in that case, what we're talking about really is a radical de-traditionalisation, particularly in Northern Europe. It's a challenging of power bases and the decentralisation of power, and epistemological power as well, and in institutions rather than the other interpretation about the logic of religion not making sense.*

**LW:** Yes, no, you've put it really raw, because the kind of general progressivist theories make it seem like it's just a neutral historical process that inevitably happens, whereas people like David Martin say "No, look at the power relations

here, there are power struggles going on. And what role is religion playing in relations to those struggles.” And I think that’s a much more interesting and convincing way of looking at it. And my own little contribution to this story in relation to the UK would be that a really important part of why secularisation theory was so powerfully developed here in the post-war period, was because of the welfare state settlement. The welfare state became a secular utopian kind of quasi-religious project. People really believed in the realization of a fairer and more just and equal society, symbolised by the National Health Service, which is a kind of sacred icon and the envy of the world. The doctor and the GP became like the parish priest, a trust-worthy father figure in the community. So you had a kind of secular faith.

**DR:** *The NHS as sacred canopy then.*

**LW:** In many ways, it was sacred. If you look at Harold Shipman, the murderer, the reason he killed so many people was that no one would believe that a doctor could behave like that, a bit like child abuse in churches. So there was such an alternative secular faith, such hope for that model, that religion became less important. Actually the churches played a big role, they threw in a lot with the welfare state (20:00) and tried to contribute to it. And that’s part of why there was the sense you didn’t need religion anymore. We found the right way to organise society. And as we lost a bit faith in that vision, people turned to religion again to find meaning and models of more just social order and so on. We’ve seen some pockets of interesting revival like the ones that you look at in Europe.

**DR:** *So where does this allude to secularisation thesis? Is it still relevant to the study of religion?*

**LW:** We can’t ever get rid of it, because it’s so engraved, for over a century, that everything we do is shaken by it. The questions we ask on questionnaires, the data we gather, the whole way we look at the world, it’s very hard to get rid of that framework, even if it’s not the most interesting framework anymore. But I think where it leaves us is, that we no longer think that it’s a purely descriptive neutral theory. We can see now that it belonged in a particular place and a



particular time and it was ideological. It was a kind of faith in its own right, it supported a vision of Europe at the cutting edge of history of the secular Nation-State starting to take over a new role in society and so on. It was bound up with those very particular conditions, and in those conditions, it made a lot of sense of what was happening. But it's not universally applicable timeless ahistorical theory.

**DR:** *What I'm going to take away from this today is it's a very good example of how we as scholars allow our ideologies or the ideologies of the culture that maybe we are not aware of to affect whole theories. When I started studying religions, the secularisation thesis was still essential part of what you learned and, yet, once you look at it, it kind of dissolves away, there was nothing really ever there.*

**LW:** And people believed in it, that's the right word.

**DR:** *And argued furiously about it.*

**LW:** And wrote passionately about it, because it stood for a certain vision of how society should be. It wasn't just about interpreting the facts. It was always a bit more than that.

**DR:** *That's a perfect place to end, it's absolutely fascinating. Thank you very much, Professor.*

**LW:** My Pleasure.

**DR:** *Thanks.*

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Version 1.2, 25 September 2015

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