

Press release

Dramatic secularization in the USA and in previous religious strongholds in Europe

Sociologists of religion present one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of religious trends worldwide – Expanded new edition of the standard work *Religion and Modernity* – Detlef Pollack: Rapid de-churching in the USA, Italy, Poland – “Secularization theory confirmed” – Trend towards belief in a “higher power” – Podcast episode 11

Münster, 18 May 2022 (exc) According to new research in the sociology of religion, secularization has increased rapidly in the past ten years, even in countries that were previously strongly Christian. “We are observing a rapid de-churching in the USA, Italy and Poland, for example, and a dramatic decline in the importance of religion in many regions of the world”, explains the sociologist of religion Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack from the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”. Together with his colleague Dr. Gergely Rosta, he has just published with Campus Verlag a much expanded and revised new edition of the standard work *Religion and Modernity: An International Comparison*, which is one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of religious trends from 1945 to the present. “Much has changed recently. For example, the image needs revising of a secular Europe on the one hand, and the deeply religious USA on the other”, says Pollack. “We can also observe across countries that belief in a personalized God is decreasing, while belief in a non-specific higher power is increasing. However, this vague belief barely now affects how people conduct their lives, and is in this respect an expression of an advancing secularization”. For the authors, many findings confirm secularization theory, which argues that modernization leads to a loss of importance for religion.

“The international and comprehensive decline of religions since the Second World War is historically unprecedented; we find in Western Europe occasional counter-trends at best”, Pollack emphasizes. “At the same time, there are similar reasons for secularization in all countries: namely, individualization, a growing level of prosperity, a broad range of consumer and leisure goods, and a high degree of diversity when it comes to worldviews”. Important factors are also changed family structures and demographic developments. “In Italy, for example, the number of multi-generational families, which are central to the transmission of faith, is declining. In Poland, on the other hand, religion plays a much smaller role in the lives of upwardly mobile younger people than it does in the lives of older people”. Barriers in the transmission of religion from the older to the younger generation are largely responsible for the breakdown of religious tradition: “These influence membership figures more than the number of those leaving the church”. Pollack was speaking in the Cluster of Excellence’s annual theme “[Tradition\(s\)](#)”, which looks at how traditions emerge, are transmitted, and change. He also explains the findings in the research podcast. **Key findings** can be found below.

Unlike most other studies, the book is based on rich data material for several continents, and filters out the political, national and social factors that influence religion. The authors see their diverse analyses as largely confirming secularization theory, which argues that modernization leads to a loss of importance on the part of religion and church. The theory was the dominant paradigm to explain religious change in modern societies in the social sciences and history for decades, but has now been strongly contested for more than twenty years. According to Pollack, though, “there are hardly any counter-tendencies to secularization in Western Europe today”. “The trend towards individual religiosity also confirms the tendency, which now even includes the USA – until now often a prime example of the compatibility of modernity and religiosity”. Secularization theory can explain many aspects of religious change in the modern period, he says, but needs to be complemented by other approaches that can take account of regionally observable religious upsurges, such as in Russia. Critics describe secularization theory as deterministic, and posit the idea of a sacralization or even a “return of the gods”: they point to debates in which religion has gained in importance in recent years as a medium for fighting political, ethnic, or national conflicts, for example with regard to acts of terrorism or reports on discrimination against religious minorities.

Secularization in the USA

As for the **USA**, Pollack states: “While more than 90% of US citizens still described themselves as religious in 2007, this figure was ten percent lower in 2017, compared to just under three-quarters for the European average. Given the alliance of evangelical Christians with Republicans, more and more Americans who are already religiously distanced are now abandoning their religious ties altogether”. A new line of conflict has emerged between religious conservatives and secular progressives, which can be seen, for example, in different attitudes to abortion and homosexuality: “Evangelical Christians with their conservative attitudes feel increasingly marginalized in the more liberal society of the USA. They expected to be strengthened by Trump’s support. However, because of their alliance with Trump and Republican values, the opposite camp sees its turning away from religion as being justified”, Pollack explains. “In some respects, our data now show a similar secularization trend as in Europe”.

As Pollack points out, it is especially in **Western Europe** that more people believe in an undefined “higher power” than in a personal God. “In contrast to personal belief in God, this vague belief barely influences how people bring up their children or their political attitudes”. A significant minority of 20 to 30% are attracted to lucky charms, horoscopes, or predictions of the future. We can therefore not speak of a secularized Europe across the board. “However, the data show that a broadening of religious forms does not lead to a vitalization of faith. Seen from the sociology of religion, this indeterminate faith is rather an intermediate stage on the path to secularization”. (apo/vvm)

Standard work *Religion and Modernity*

Originally published in 2015 and also available in an English translation by Oxford University Press, the standard work *Religion and Modernity: An International Comparison* has recently been published by Campus Verlag in an expanded and updated new edition. The authors undertake

case studies for Italy, the Netherlands, East and West Germany, Poland, Russia, the USA, South Korea and Brazil, and draw general conclusions from the comparison between Eastern and Western Europe, the USA, Asian and South American countries, thereby drawing a richly detailed and vivid panorama of religious change in different societies.

The study supplements current analyses with historical perspectives, and gives empirical foundations to central theorems in the sociology of religion, such as the market theory, which argues that a plurality of religions leads to more religiosity, and the secularization thesis, which sees a loss in the significance of religion in the modern period. “Both theorems explain isolated developments, but each in itself cannot interpret the role of religion in modern societies in a way that is regionally and temporally comprehensive”, Pollack points out. “We want to explain both religious decline across nations *and* upswings in religion that can be observed regionally”. The book draws on a range of representative datasets from different time periods: World Values Survey (WVS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), General Population Survey of the Social Sciences (ALLBUS), Religion Monitor of the Bertelsmann Foundation, General Social Survey (GSS), Pew Forum, as well as church and government statistics. (apo/vvm)

Reference: [Detlef Pollack, Gergely Rosta: Religion in der Moderne. Ein internationaler Vergleich \(„Religion und Moderne“, Band 1\), 2., aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage, Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag 2022.](#)

Central findings

1) When religious identities are combined with political, economic or national interests, this often helps strengthen religion and church.

The study shows this connection with the example of **Russia**, where identification with Orthodoxy has risen rapidly in broad sections of the population in recent decades, combined with an equally strong increase in national pride. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church became the new marker of identity, with church and state entering into a close alliance. As Detlef Pollack has recently pointed out in [articles](#) in the context of the war against Ukraine, religiosity should be understood here more as an expression of cultural identity than as a form of internalized faith.

This perspective can also explain the attractiveness of the Pentecostal churches in **Latin America** and the Protestant churches in **South Korea**, whose members can achieve greater prosperity and social advancement through conducting disciplined lifestyles.

2) Religious ties often become looser again when the political, economic or national goals pursued by religious means have been achieved.

A higher level of prosperity or the expansion of the social and educational system often makes it no longer necessary to use church channels, since other paths are now open for political participation, vocational training and social support.

This was true for most countries in **Western Europe** in the decades after 1945, and for the German church. In **Germany**, church services were full to the brim after the national, social and moral catastrophe of National Socialism. Religious and non-religious interests combined: the churches were a haven of social order, moral guidance and political orientation. In a time of hardship, social insecurity and fear of a new war, they offered many people a spiritual and emotional home. A little later, though, an increasing number of Germans felt that the church had become an authoritarian institution that they wanted to emancipate themselves from. The end of the 1960s saw a wave of exits from the church, with hundreds of thousands of people, primarily the highly educated, men, city dwellers and high-income earners, turning their backs on the church year after year. Fewer and fewer saw the church as a trustworthy, politically and morally indispensable institution that society needed to maintain its cohesion.

Sociology speaks of functional differentiation to capture these processes, which it sees as an important feature of modern societies: social subsystems such as religion, politics, law and the economy move apart and gain functional autonomy. This reduces the chances for religion and church to influence these non-religious spheres of society and to permeate all spheres of social life with religion. Even if differentiation does not lead automatically to a decline in the importance of religion, such an effect is very likely.

3) If religion and politics get too close to each other, this often has a negative effect on the integrative power of religion.

However, as the studies in some countries show, the combination of religion and political interests can also result in increasing dechurchification. In the **USA**, for example, many people who were already distanced from religion have recently given up their religious ties altogether as a result of the alliance of evangelicals with conservative political positions, with the moderate Protestant mainline churches being particularly affected by the loss of members.

In **Poland**, too, according to the study, more and more liberal Catholics are turning their backs on their church, because its moral theology and national understanding are similar to those of the conservative “Law and Justice” party. In **Italy**, Catholicism was hemmed in by party politics until around the turn of the millennium, without politics and religion coinciding. With the rise of the right-wing populist Lega Nord under its party leader Matteo Salvini, however, the country has been increasingly riven by political division, with the populists using religion to mobilize Catholic supporters, which is precisely the reason that liberal believers are distancing themselves from the church.

Sociologically speaking, these are often processes of absorption: a religion that ties its relevance to its non-religious utility exposes itself to the possibility of being compared and replaced. According to the authors, it runs the risk of devaluing the salvation goods that it provides.

4) Dwindling belief in a personalized God is a sign of advancing secularization.

The authors note a growing worldwide shift away from belief in a personalized God who, according to religious belief, can intervene in one’s life and whom believers have to justify themselves before. In most **Western European countries**, the majority of believers have turned

away from belief in a personal God, as proclaimed in the Bible, and now only believe in a higher power whose work cannot be directly experienced. According to the book, this form of faith is less important to people, which is the reason that Pollack and Rosta interpret this “dilution of transcendence” not only as a change in the content of religiosity, but also as an expression of advancing secularization. Among the reasons behind these tendencies of dilution is people’s growing general scepticism towards all-encompassing world interpretations and ideologies. According to the surveys, a diverse range of spiritual goods does not help strengthen faith.

5) Dwindling belief in God is preceded by a decline in communal rituals.

According to the book, communal rituals such as attending church services or saying grace before a meal strengthen faith, but are becoming less and less relevant today. In the 1950s, religious practices were widespread in the **Netherlands** and **Germany**, for example, but are only relevant to an ever-shrinking minority today. According to Pollack and Rosta, maintaining religious practices involves more effort for the individual than, for example, mere church membership or strongly adhering to one’s faith. If religious rituals become less important, this also has, as the study demonstrates, a negative and long-term effect on church membership and faith, a trend that can be seen in most countries in **Western Europe**.

6) The more people value self-determination, enjoying life and self-fulfilment, the more they distance themselves from the church.

Even if a majority of people in Germany believe that they can be a believer individually and without a church, it is statistically only a minority who can be said to be Christians without a church. According to the surveys, only a few live their Christian faith without a church institution and community. The importance that social integration has for faith can also be seen in the fact that forms of highly individual esoteric spirituality outside church and Christianity often fluctuate strongly and are not very stable.

7) The more opportunities there are for people to fulfil themselves in work and leisure, the more attention shifts from religious to secular practices.

Modern societies, with their wide range of cultural, entertainment and leisure activities, offer a variety of alternatives to a religious way of life, Pollack and Rosta speaking here of *distraction*: when there is a broad range of non-religious goods on offer, then people shift their attention from religion to other areas of life such as work, family, friendship, entertainment and consumption. The loosening of religious ties is often not the result of a conscious decision between religious and non-religious goods, but more a creeping, barely reflective, process of redefining value preferences.

8) The differentiation of society usually has a negative effect on religiosity, but can sometimes strengthen religious plurality.

As can be observed in **Western Europe** since the 1960s, greater differentiation of society into individual areas such as politics, law, religion and economics generally leads to a decrease in religiosity. However, Pollack and Rosta also note contrary developments in some areas. For

example, in functionally differentiated societies that separate church and state, new freedoms can arise for religious communities: thus, the **Alevi**s are a recognized public body in **Germany**, but in **Turkey** they are not respected as a separate religious group and are politically suppressed.

The surveys show tendencies both of social adaptation to the secularized majority society and of religious self-assertion among **people of Turkish origin in West Germany**: the second and third generation of immigrants attend the mosque less often than the first, but at the same time consider themselves to be religious more often. In this respect, they emphasize the importance of their origins and at the same time adapt to the majority society. According to Pollack and Rosta, two-thirds of people of Turkish origin in West Germany describe themselves as religious, compared to only two-fifths of the West German population as a whole.

9) External religious coercion prevents people from internalizing faith.

According to the authors, faith benefits from community and institutional embeddedness. However, if this is so strong that the individual has hardly any personal leeway, this effect turns into its opposite and intrinsic motives of faith weaken. The state-church heritage plays a major role in **Western Europe**: unlike in the USA, where church and state have been institutionally separated for more than 200 years, the church in **Germany** and **other Western European societies** is often perceived as an authoritarian institution of rule, with widespread scepticism towards the church being the result. The authors see another example of the connection between church structures experienced as authoritarian and the weakening of intrinsic faith motives in the Protestant congregations of **South Korea**, where members are exposed to a high level of church control.

10) Small religious communities benefit from conflicts with the majority society, especially if they also represent non-religious interests.

Evangelical and Pentecostal groups in the **USA** and **Latin America** use a subcultural identity to set themselves apart from the majority society, while seeking to influence that society through social, moral and political interventions, for example when it comes to abortion and homosexuality. According to the book, their relationship to the rest of society is marked by the conflictual simultaneity of demarcation and connection. This often has an identity-forming effect on the members, who in this way can effectively use their faith in socio-political debate.
(apo/vvm)

Caption: Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack (Photo: Lena Giovanazzi), book cover (Campus Verlag)