

The Secularization Project

Secular Surge: A New Fault Line In American Politics
by David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, and John C. Green
Cambridge University Press, 2021

A précis
by William Hugo, Capuchin

Secular Surge moves us away from thinking of secularization on a dichotomous continuum in favor of a pluralism that makes important distinctions. Though the authors are interested in how secularization relates to American politics, their study helps people of faith think about their religious practice and institutions in new ways.

Campbell, Layman, and Green have categorized American society into four impactful groups:

1. Religionists are guided by religious beliefs that typically override other sources of knowledge. Their worldview is managed by revealed faith or denominational tenets, and they frequently attend weekly church/mosque/synagogue services, if not spend most of their holy day there. The largest religionist groups in America are Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics. However, Evangelical Protestants constitute the group that is most monolithic among them and impactful for this study.
2. Non-religionists don't receive guidance from religious sources or the natural world. Oddly, they don't receive guidance from explicitly nonreligious sources either. They typically don't trust institutions and mostly want to be free from outside interference. Many once drifted away from religious participation. On a holy day, they are most likely to be at home watching a football game. They rarely attend religious services. Their label more describes what they are not, than what they are.
3. Secularists are quite distinct from non-religionists in that they are guided by science and "factual" evidence. They are active participants in reading, discussing, movements, and institutions that are based on these nonreligious sources. On holidays, they might be found at a discussion in a coffee shop or attending a lecture in a museum. They are defined by what they are, as opposed to the non-religionists. Secularists are frequently activists in nonreligious movements.
4. Religious Secularists endorse science and other non-religious sources, but also attend religious services with some regularity. For them, science and faith are not opposed to each other. The authors opine that many are Episcopalians or Reformed Jews. As I reflected on their categories, I imagined that modern official Catholicism fits in this category. The Catholic notion of Truth being one, both revealed and reasoned, seems to champion this category. However, the authors

give Catholicism little attention. Perhaps official Catholic teaching doesn't reach the pew affecting politics, which is the interest of the authors.

Two of the authors' distinctions were important for me. First, the distinction between non-religionists and secularist is more helpful than the idea of "the Nones" alone. Neither attend religious services. However, while the non-religionists either drifted away from religious practice without being attracted to anything else in particular or never were attracted to religious or non-religious guides, the secularists purposefully choose to be guided by the secular sources of science, reason, and the humanistic good. This makes them activists in ways non-religionists typically are not. This is reflected in the data indicating that religionists and secularists are the most involved in societal causes, though for different reasons.

The second important set of distinctions for me were those between secularists and religious secularists, and that between religionists and religious secularists. These distinctions stake out what I believe to be the official Catholic stance that faith and reason must stand together. Truth cannot be divided. I wish the authors had paid more attention to this Catholic possibility.

If you love to follow politics, you'll love the rest of the book. Briefly, the authors trace how secularists predominantly identify as Democrats and religionists (Evangelical Protestants mostly) tend toward Republicanism. They explore how activist secularists pose a challenge to the traditional Democratic Party because of their unabated desire for progressive change. Will secularists do to the Democratic Party what Evangelicals did to the Republican Party?

While the political implications intrigued me, I was always thinking of applications to us as a church organization. How quickly I have merged non-religionists and secularists into the monolithic Nones. Have I missed something by doing that? A second implication explicitly treated in the book is the effect of religious institutions and pastors who politicize "from the pulpit." Doing so barely affects Evangelical religionists, but moves others quickly toward becoming non-religionists.

If you want a mind-expanding read around the idea and experience of secularization, this might be your book.