

# The Persistence of Faith Among Nonheterosexual Christians: Evidence for the Neosecularization Thesis of Religious Transformation

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*The neosecularization thesis, which combines the “secularization” and “postsecularization” paradigms, argues that religion is in a constant state of transformation (thus persistence). It also argues that the examination of “secularization” needs to be conducted on three levels: macro, meso, and micro. Drawing from a quantitative and qualitative study involving 565 nonheterosexual Christians in the United Kingdom, this article aims to lend credence to the neosecularization thesis, focusing on the micro, or individual, level only. This article highlights the lack of influence and impact of religious authority structures on the respondents’ views of sexuality and spirituality. Data also demonstrated that, in the construction of the respondents’ identity and Christian faith, as well as the fashioning of Christian living, religious authority structures were considered the least significant factor, compared to the respondents’ employment of human reason and biblical understanding, within the framework of lived experiences. On the whole, data suggested that the self, rather than religious authority structures, steers the respondents’ journeys of spirituality and sexuality. This is evidence of the “detraditionalization” process on the late modern religious landscape, where the basis of religious faith and practice is primarily predicted on the self, rather than traditions and structures.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the developmental history of sociology of religion, “secularization” is arguably one of, if not the, most contested concepts. Nevertheless, years of debate have not succeeded in addressing conclusively the basic question—Is religion in decline in (particularly late or post) modern society? This scenario is closely related to the definitional pluralism of this concept (Hamilton 1998; Sommerville 1998; Swatos and Christiano 1999). It is not surprising that, commenting on this, Demerath and Williams (1992:89) concluded that “there is perhaps no single concept in the study of religion that is more central, more contentious, and more confusing.”

Undoubtedly, this scenario calls for a more clearly defined framework when scholars examine this concept, both theoretically and empirically. Definitional fuzziness in this area only exacerbates the situation. More importantly, in recent years, scholars have demonstrated an important awareness, in line with postmodern thought that emphasizes localized narratives rather than totalizing and universalizing metanarratives, that social and geographical contexts must be taken into account when this concept is examined. For example, social factors (e.g., modernization) that contribute to the decline of institutional Christianity in Europe might not be as useful as scholars once assumed in explaining the situation in another geographical context (say the United States). Scholars are now more aware of the fact that the relationship between modernity and religion needs to be contextualized (e.g., Berger 1999; Davie 2000a, 2000b). “Secularization” as a concept also needs to be defined much more clearly with reference to specific processes (e.g., disenchantment of the world; pluralization), and the levels (e.g., macro, meso, and micro) at which such processes take place. These levels themselves are inextricably related (Dobbelaere 1984, 1999).

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*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 41:2 (2002) 199–212*

In general, there exist two opposing camps in the debate of “secularization.” The first camp of scholars, primarily using survey data on religious beliefs as well as statistics on church attendance and membership, argue that religion is increasingly declining in modern society. Specifically, there is a transformation in religion’s internal structure and organization, its position in the social order, and individual believers’ orientation, which eventually affects their religious practice (e.g., Wilson 1969, 1982; Tschannen 1991; Bruce 1995; Voyé 1999). Analyzing the trend of attendance, Bruce (2000) confidently predicted that mainline Christian denominations in the United Kingdom would “rest in peace” by 2025.

Also examining official statistics (primarily from the United States and Latin America), the second camp of scholars asserted that religion, far from declining, is indeed thriving. Evidence for this includes the proliferation of the new religious movements, the persistence of religious beliefs, the growth of American mainline churches, the spread of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America, and the growth of non-Christian religions (e.g., Finke and Stark 1992; Stark 1996, 1999; Berger 1999).

Space does not allow a detailed review here, but good discussions abound elsewhere (e.g., Gill, Hadaway, and Marler 1998; Dobbelaere 1999; Swatos and Christiano 1999; Aldridge 2000; Gorski 2000; Woodhead and Heelas 2000). Nevertheless, what is interesting is that “secularization” scholars tended to construct their arguments based on the Western European experience, while the “postsecularization” scholars rest their case primarily on the American experience. This accentuates the point I made earlier about the importance of treating contextualized data with great care, and attempts to make universal generalizations should be discouraged. Indeed, the complexity of this concept means that:

More research is required in order to specify—on a local and global scale—the *particular* circumstances (and dynamics) under which *particular* forms of religion are waxing or waning. (Woodhead and Heelas 2000:431, emphasis in original)

#### DAVID YAMANE’S NEOSECULARIZATION THESIS

Yamane (1997, 1998), in this journal, criticized the “postsecularization” scholars for their misguided enthusiasm and misinterpretation of the “secularization” paradigm. He asserted that the “secularization” paradigm did not argue the decline and eventual disappearance of religion, but its *transformation* or *change* (and therefore persistence) in response to the forces of modernity. This transformation takes place on three levels: societal, organizational, and individual. He also criticized the “postsecularization” paradigm for focusing on the individual and organizational levels, ignoring the societal or macrosocial level. He in turn proposed a “neosecularization” paradigm that adapted the old paradigm, taking into account the new paradigm.

Constructing his case in the same vein as Chaves (1994), Yamane (1997:115) argued that “‘secularization’ is best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority and, more specially, the declining sphere of influence of *religious authority structures*” (emphasis in original). These structures have the social power (legitimized by at least a language of the supernatural and the divine) to enforce order, as well as control behavior and access to “religious goods.” Therefore, secularization, as a process, occurs when such religious authority structures “decline in their ability to control societal-level institutions, meso-level organizations, and individual-level beliefs and behaviors” (Yamane 1997:115).

Yamane did not discuss this decline on the organizational level; he referred readers to Chaves’s (1994) work for that. He did, however, provide concrete evidence to illustrate the decline on the societal level by citing, for instance, the work of Casanova (1994), who argued that public religion has become more “private” and that religion is increasingly retreating from the public sphere. He also provided ample examples to elucidate the decline on the individual level. In this article, I would like to focus on the *individual level* only. Therefore, I will elaborate Yamane’s discussion of this before turning to my own data and arguments.

On the individual level, Yamane argued that while the quantity of individual religious beliefs and practice might be on the increase, we should not ignore the *qualitative* transformation that occurred within the individual's religious orientation, manifested in their beliefs and practice. He argued that religious authority structures are increasingly losing their ability to control what people choose to believe and how they practice their religion. Individuals are increasingly empowered to actively construct their religious faith, rather than uncritically relying on views prescribed by authority structures. He cited a wide range of empirical research to strengthen his case (e.g., Hammond 1992; McNamara 1992; Roof 1993).

It is to this point that my article aims to lend credence. As I will demonstrate later, it is erroneous to assume simplistically that nonheterosexual Christians are inclined to leave institutional Christianity because of a lack of affirmation and acceptance, and that there is no space within the institution for them to engage with religious authority structures in doctrinal and practical negotiations that could effect change. While it is undeniable that a lot of self-defined gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians do distance themselves from churches because of their sexualities, many remain in this potentially stigmatizing environment and persist in their spiritual journey, which seems to be at odds with what the religious authority structures prescribe. This is insightfully demonstrated by Dillon's (1999) work on pro-change Catholics in the United States (gays and lesbians, and those who advocate ordination of women priests and choice in abortion). She argued that, despite the stark contrast between their conviction and official Catholic positions on such issues, pro-change believers remain within the institution to engage in reinterpretation of doctrines and practices to effect changes from within, with the aim of constructing a more inclusive and participative church. Dillon asserted

[the] interpretive power in the Catholic Church is not located solely in the official hierarchical power structure, but is dispersed, seen in the everyday interpretive activities of ordinary Catholics. (Dillon 1999:9)

Nevertheless, what is salient in such reinterpretation is that the *self* of the believers, rather than authority structures, primarily steers the course. To me, this strikes a resonant chord with Yamane's argument of neosecularization on the individual level. I shall demonstrate this by highlighting four themes: (1) sexual and religious identities; (2) religiosity versus spirituality; (3) basis of Christian faith; and (4) basis of sexual ethics. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, I shall argue that religious authority structures are indeed weak in their influence on individual nonheterosexual Christians, particularly, though not exclusively, in the area of human sexualities. The self appears to be the ultimate reference point for the respondents' religious faith and practice. It must be acknowledged that this research project focuses on the respondents' current religious orientation. It is not a longitudinal study examining change over time. The main aim is to demonstrate that as far as their current religious orientation is concerned, the self, rather than religious authority structures, serves as the primary component of the framework within which the respondents engage in the doctrinal and practical reinterpretation of issues affecting their lives. But first, a brief account about the research project and the sample.

#### RESEARCH PROJECT AND RESPONDENTS

The data was drawn from a national survey 565 self-defined nonheterosexual Christians, which was designed to examine a host of issues in relation to sexuality and spirituality. It consisted of two stages. Stage 1 involved the collection of primarily quantitative data through the use of postal questionnaires (14 pages each) across the United Kingdom, between May and October 1997. Stage 2 involved semistructured interviewing, between October 1997 and January 1998, of 61 respondents living in Scotland, Wales, and every region of England.

Since representative samples are unobtainable for (at least partially) "hidden" populations such as this (e.g., Heaphy, Weeks, and Donovan 1998), various sampling strategies were employed to maximize respondent variability in the construction of a convenience or opportunity

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