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8. Catholic Theological Anthropology, Capital, and Secularization

Reassessing the Patterns in Light of 21st-Century Conditions

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Abstract

This essay examines secularization in the twenty-first-century U.S. and its relationship to Catholic theological anthropology, through the lens of capital as well as the related issues of growth and consumption. It proceeds from the assumption that there are evident tensions between Catholic conceptions of the common good and contemporary capitalist economics, as articulated by Pope Francis and others. By analyzing macro-economic theories of growth as articulated by Thomas Piketty and Robert Gordon, it becomes clear that the high levels of growth in twentieth-century Western economies were anomalous both with respect to previous history and to recent realities. The second section examines time in dialogue with social theorist Douglas Rushkoff as well as Robert Putnam's work on social capital, examining how this dynamic relates to the aforementioned issue of growth as well as trends of secularization. The third section deals with Frank Trentmann's work on consumption, tying it into the previous section as well as Pope Francis's critique of consumerism. The essay

concludes that the circumstances it explores ought to force a reconsideration of classical secularization theories that have assumed secularization as an effect of prosperity; today's secularization ought to be read against the backdrops of economic desperation and lowered social capital. Theological anthropology, as a result, needs to shift its attention away from *homo economicus* toward the lives of contemporary people who still must view capital and its implications as central to their lives but with much less hope that economic desires and accomplishments might fulfill them.

Keywords: secularization, theological anthropology, growth, time, consumption

Introduction

It has become a commonplace in contemporary Catholic ecclesial and theological discourse that late capitalist¹ economic life is in some kind of tension with a robust understanding of Catholic commitments to the common good. All but the most vociferous free-market defenders (and even some of those) have acknowledged this tension in some way or another. The shape that these critiques take varies significantly along political and other ideological lines, but there seems to be a broad consensus that something is wrong with the contemporary situation and that the tradition contains resources to address them.

At the same time, secularization has been on the rise in the rich countries, particularly in the United States where it had been significantly behind Europe. Rates of disaffiliation, particularly among Catholics, have increased markedly, with most of them ending up in the “none” category (Miller; see also McCarty and Vitek). Debates about economics and the secular have gone back and forth since the time of Max Weber, especially in light of the secularization theses of the 1960s. Today, rising levels of secularization in the U.S. have accompanied increasing economic stagnation in the middle and lower classes. These realities require continuing re-evaluation and restatement of secularization theories. For the purposes of this study, I would like to evaluate such theories in the interest of Catholic theological anthropology. How should Catholic theology respond to the insights about human nature that we can draw from these trends toward secularization?

This study will probe the relationship between economics and contemporary Catholic patterns of disaffiliation and secularization, particularly in the United States and Western Europe. On a broader level, I will argue that economic causes, along with changes of attitude about sexuality, are the lead causes of secularization and disaffiliation among Catholics particularly. Reducing this phenomenon to either of these causes obscures precisely in its assumption that such factors can be fully isolated, but distinguishing them helps to highlight the role each has played.

In this essay, I will draw upon economic, sociological, and theological sources to diagnose the contemporary situation regarding economics and secularization. My analysis will begin by looking at three major factors in the relationship between economics and secularization: growth, time, and consumption. In dialogue with important thinkers on all of these topics, I will describe how they factor into secularization and what kind of challenge they present for

¹ I use the term “late capitalist” in the sense used in Mandel, and also prominently in Jameson and Habermas.

the church. On the basis of this analysis, I will further flesh out causes and relationships between these factors and broader social patterns, and on this basis propose how the church can constructively respond to it. Before making this case, however, it is helpful to see the state of the question by looking at how some prominent Catholics and other sympathetic observers have diagnosed the question of how economics relates to today's religious climate. It is to these critiques that I now turn to analyze, in a sense, that state of the question.

Catholic Critiques of the Contemporary Economy

Pope Francis has emerged as one of the leading critics of contemporary economic realities – indeed he has been cited and embraced by Douglas Rushkoff, Naomi Klein, and other thinkers concerned with undermining neoliberal capitalism. Francis argues in *Evangelii Gaudium* against what he calls an “economy that kills” through pervasive inequality and dehumanizing labor practices (2013: 53). Francis critiques those who “defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world” (2013: 54). For Francis, in this document and his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'*, economic growth for its own sake has contributed to social injustice in the world. He thus takes a perspective on contemporary capitalism that focuses on its failures in light of the ideals proposed by Catholic social teaching.

Francis dealt directly with the issue of consumerism during his visit to the United States, arguing that today's society favors a “consumption which does not favor bonding, a consumption which has little to do with human relationships” (2015). Consumption for Francis thus engenders a kind of anti-humanism manifested particularly in what he calls the throwaway society – if we are ready to consume and dispose of products so readily, it is no surprise that we are similarly prepared to do so with people. It gives rise to what Francis calls elsewhere the globalization of indifference – people become so caught up in their products and the economy that they neglect their other responsibilities, particularly to the poor. Francis's critique of consumer capitalism, then, is not just as an individual moral issue or one that leads to religious neglect, but as tied up in a number of social justice issues.

Francis is hardly the first recent Pope to speak up on this set of issues. John Paul II took up a similar critique of consumerism, particularly in the post-1989 situation where many Eastern European countries, including his native Poland, were shifting from Communism to an eager embrace of capitalism. In 1999, for example, his World Day of Peace message strongly attacked consumerism as a threat to human rights. While John Paul's critique of capitalism has a somewhat different thrust than that of Francis, it is still a strong one and belies claims that his *Centesimus Annus* represented a turn toward the free market. Indeed, in that very encyclical, John Paul attacks “the affluent society or the consumer society,” which is preferable in many respects to Marxism and shows the limitations of the latter system, but nevertheless “agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs” (1991: 19).

Other contemporary church figures viewed quite differently from Francis approach the matter in a similarly critical tone. Archbishop Charles Chaput, not known as a friend of Francis, argues in his recent book *Strangers in a Strange Land*, that “The real soul of modern American life is the market” (110). Thus, as he puts it, the market's religion is really money and profit. His further statement that in a market society, “truth is not a category unless

consumers make it so” reveals a bit of his distinct emphasis from Francis, but his critique of the market, at least in theory, is no softer (111). For Chaput, the market and its logic damage society through inculcating a moral relativism that undermines traditional values – not just moral teachings but also basic underpinnings of community.

William Cavanaugh combines similar language to that of Chaput with a stronger critique of neoliberal economic structures. According to Cavanaugh, the true characteristic of consumer culture is “not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things” (34). Cavanaugh goes on to argue that consumerism “is not so much about having more as it is about having something else,” such that it is not buying but shopping that is at its heart” (35). For Cavanaugh, this is a “spiritual disposition, a way of looking at the world around us that is deeply formative,” and one that is in rivalry with the traditional Christian account. He thus argues for a Christian approach to living that reemphasizes the attachment of consumers to producers of goods in order avoid the detachment that comes from purchasing products of whose origins we have little knowledge.

In a different vein, Protestant theologian and Pope Francis admirer Harvey Cox has argued that, “for all the religions of the world, however they may differ from one another, the religion of The Market has become the most formidable rival” (19). Cox thus portrays the market as a god necessarily in competition with the Christian one, a “surrogate religion” that must be deprived of its “sacred aura” to create a proper space for Christian ethics (256-57). Many years after his classic *The Secular City*, Cox pinpoints the market as the present focus of “religious” devotion. Cox thus helps to demonstrate the broader concern about economic reductionism that pervades much contemporary Christian thought, particularly for those who have been concerned with secularization.

All of the above perspectives assume the market and capital as the controlling global paradigm, replacing or modifying traditional sources and values such as religion. More insidious than intellectual systems of atheism, consumerism lures religious believers in while persuading them to abandon their values concerning social justice and the common good. This diverse group of theologians and church leaders all view consumerism as a problem with respect to Christian religious life in today’s world and propose constructive approaches to overcome it. I would like to suggest that the relative unanimity of these thinkers indicates that there is a problem and that this problem might be connected to broader patterns of secularization, and I want to take a broader approach to answering it.

The question I want to pose to and with these thinkers, then, is whether secularization and economics are intertwined, how this might be the case, and what resources there are within Catholic theological anthropology to address some of these issues. In pursuit of this question, I now turn to the insights of contemporary macro-economists, particularly Thomas Piketty and Robert Gordon, as well as the social critic Douglas Rushkoff, on growth. As the factor that has caused market capitalism to become so unquestionable to so many people, and simultaneously as the cause, directly and indirectly, of much despair, growth must be reckoned with in any account of economics and secularization.

Growth and Secularization: Does Correlation Equal Causation?

One of the most important insights of contemporary economic theory has been its diagnosis of the extraordinary character of the period ranging from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries in Western Europe and the United States with respect to economic growth. After a long period from the end of the Roman Empire in which virtually no economic or demographic growth took place worldwide, beginning with the Second Industrial Revolution, enormous growth in both these areas occurred, resulting in the society and standard of living that we now take for granted. It is against this backdrop that all of today's economic and political realities, in the U.S. and Western Europe, are predicated and analyzed.

Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* has been one of the defining economic texts of our current era, and it is worth attending to its insights. Piketty's book has become perhaps best known for its diagnosis of the growth and causes of inequality. At the same time, however, Piketty depicts a larger story of economic growth. Economic growth as we know it is a recent phenomenon – as Piketty comments, economic growth between the year 0 and 1700 was about .1 percent per year (74). This is a combination figure of demographic and productivity figures – the upshot is that world population and economic productivity barely changed over that period. As a result, economic growth and its expectation were significantly smaller societal factors, since low growth had been the *status quo* for centuries.

The Industrial Revolution, particularly its second phase in the nineteenth century, changed this situation significantly. Finally, in the twentieth century, Piketty notes that growth became a reality of relevance to everyone (87). Living standards in Europe and the United States skyrocketed, particularly for the middle classes. There was thus, in Piketty's estimation, a kind of golden age of growth that occurred between roughly 1913 and 2012. This period was also, broadly speaking, a kind of golden age of economic equality in which the middle class particularly converged somewhat in income level with the upper classes.

This golden age of growth, however, has slowed significantly, and Piketty posits that it is unlikely to return with anything like the levels of growth seen in the period just discussed. By historical standards, 1% growth is very high, and this is a more likely number than those seen during the Industrial Revolution. It is thus appropriate, drawing on Piketty, to speak of the present economic situation as a "new normal." Even as our newspapers vigorously monitor the monthly jobs reports, it is unlikely that economic growth will ever reach the levels it did in the mid-twentieth century, particularly for those in the middle and lower classes.

The contemporary problem, as Piketty sketches it out, is that these factors have combined to exacerbate inequality. The contemporary U.S., as he lays it out, has created a situation in which there is an increasing inequality of income from labor, creating a class of "hypermanagers" with good educations and jobs (264). Piketty refers to this as the greatest inequality of income from labor ever recorded, which for the moment combines with a high inequality of wealth that is nevertheless lower than it was in Old Europe at the dawn of the First World War.

For the purposes of this study, Piketty's work effectively makes that point that economic conditions are historically situated parts of human life rather than external, impersonal forces.

It also makes the point that the recent past has been characterized by an extraordinary economic growth that in turn has become the framework for people's expectations about the economy and their place within it. This mentality influences society even as the growth people expect does not materialize. It is hard not to imagine this mentality influencing religious practice on some level.

Robert Gordon has expanded upon Piketty's narrative within the specifically American context. Gordon's point is very similar, namely, that certain innovations that raised the standard of living and increased growth within American society cannot be repeated (1). Like Piketty, Gordon is also keen to point out that due to this unrepeatability of innovations, past levels of growth are unlikely to return at anything like the level once attained (2). Gordon's study is wide-ranging and fascinating, but I would like to focus my attention particularly on his concluding section about economic headwinds with a view to what they might contribute to our story about secularization.

According to Gordon, the headwinds facing the Western world today first include rising inequality, which means that the spoils of growth – namely, accumulated savings and wealth – tend toward the top whereas the median and lower ends of the economic spectrum experience less growth in this area (613). This has been abetted by a change in job composition, with more jobs at the top and bottom and fewer in the middle (615). Education is for Gordon the second headwind – both inequality of access to education as well as issues such as student debt that can set back those with education and particularly those who do not finish higher education (626). The other headwinds include demography and the need to pay back debt, as well as the collapse of social structures such as marriage in the lower end of the income spectrum, all of which add up to economic stagnation.

Gordon thus adds to Piketty's analysis a more textured description of why the "special century," as he calls it, was special, and why its aftermath is particularly challenging. Given that existing technologies have increased quality of life up to a certain point, these technologies become part of the fabric of society and also less subject to growth due to their broad accessibility. Slowed growth, combined with increasing automation of existing occupations, creates a society that is no longer oriented around wage labor as it once was. These shifts, "disrupt," to use a popular term in the world of technology, existing societal structures, including religion. As with other disruptions, religious structures and beliefs, along with other vestiges of these traditional structures, will continue to exist, but the context in which they make sense to large masses of people increasingly do not.

Cultural theorist Douglas Rushkoff has described the contemporary economy in terms of the "dumbwaiter effect," in which "mass marketing now disconnects worker from the people they're serving" (Rushkoff 2016: 19). The logic of growth prioritizes the needs of corporations over those of human beings, and it has become the logic of society that few dare to question. This logic means that "the industrial business plan is continuing to repress our ability to generate wealth and create value," precisely because the one model that is not disrupted by the digital age is the model of corporate profit (2016: 54). Rushkoff's observations here echo Stephen Marglin's insight that the apparatus of contemporary economics has been "shaped by an agenda focused on showing that markets are good for people rather than on discovering how markets actually work" (Marglin: 3).

The economic situation we face, then, is one of adjustment to a lower-growth economy while still bearing the expectations inspired by the fast-growth economy particularly between the 1940s and 1960s. This is a recipe for social turmoil, and that is indeed what we seem to be experiencing. Automation, particularly of trucks and taxis, will only exacerbate these trends.² The economy increasingly nakedly serves itself rather than people, and this shift profoundly challenges the Christian vision of the human person.

Time and Money: The Limits of Growth and the Limits of Time

As Douglas Rushkoff has effectively argued, the realities described above have led to a challenging situation. Our entire societal approach to employment and economics more broadly centers around growth, based on the presumption that what has gone on for the past 150 years will continue to happen. Political candidates make their case based on this – think for example of Jeb Bush’s promise of 4% growth during the 2016 Republican primary debates. As discussed in the previous section, however, it is clear that such growth is unlikely to return in the West and indeed likely to slow down in other parts of the world such as China as they reach first-world levels of development. At the same time, in Rushkoff’s words, “the income disparity between people and corporations has gotten too wide” (2016: 81). Rushkoff reminds us that the corporation “didn’t just emerge as a natural phenomenon,” but rather is a kind of program to “repress exchange, competition, and innovation,” thus to retrieve the values of empire (2016: 71).

The crisis of growth, as we might call it, in the Western economies has also become a kind of crisis of time. This is so in part because, as Gordon points out, the 40-hour work week has remained consistent since its initial implementation in the 1930s – a point about which Rushkoff has been quite critical (58-59). Given the increase in two-income and single-parents households in that time frame, this clearly has implications for family dynamics broadly speaking and for secularization in particular. Time is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in religion; it is unsurprising that lack or perceived lack of time would correlate with a decline in such participation.

Rushkoff has argued elsewhere that in today’s world, “society has reoriented itself to the present moment” (2013: 2). Rushkoff notably wrote this sentence in 2002, well before the rise of smartphones and social media made the world ever more focused on the present. These changes have not merely made life more convenient, but like capitalism itself have fostered a new worldview and concept of time. Insofar as religion represents in part a set of concepts about how to orient oneself to time, this shift has important implications for religious time.

Arlie Russell Hochschild has written about this new temporal orientation in *The Time Bind*, and this factor has played into Robert Putnam’s studies of changes in the American social fabric. Putnam’s work has focused on the decline of social capital and its relationship to broader phenomena that have caused it, such as economic status and education, as well as its effects, such as the decline in civic engagement. Putnam in *Bowling Alone* analyzes several factors for the decline in civic engagement. Time, he argues, does not explain this issue on its

² Foer and Ford both deal with the implications of automation for employment and broader American societal concerns.

own – civic engagement has dropped both among those who have more and those who have less free time compared to past eras. Financial vulnerability, he argues, also provides part of the explanation – this, he, says, dampens community involvement even among the well-to-do (2000: 193). Putnam also highlights the role of women’s involvement in the workplace in this set of issues – it creates more opportunity for civic engagement, but less time, and leads people toward relaxation rather than engagement as after-work activity (2000: 196).

My focus on time here is to parallel the big picture laid out by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* on how secularization changes how we think of the cosmos, including the role of time. It is a disenchanting, to use the (disputed) Weberian term. Taylor describes secularization as in one sense a rejection of “higher times” such that events “now exist only in this one dimension, in which they stand at greater and lesser temporal distance” (195). As Taylor puts it, in a religious context, “a tract of time is identified not just by its placing in secular time order, but also by its proximity to higher times” (60). In contrast, today, “Our encasing in secular time is also something we have brought about in the way we live and order our lives” (59). Our view of time, then, is deeply implanted and deeply influential on day-to-day life. Shifts in how people think of time represent major worldview shifts that will have a profound impact in particular on their religious beliefs and practices. Taylor’s analysis describes one major shift in the cultural understanding of time over a long period; I believe that we are reaching the culmination of a new phase in this process.

The phrase, “time is money,” and its various offshoots determine important aspects of contemporary American society. My argument is that these time pressures, and their relationship to civic engagement and social capital as laid out by Putnam, clearly contribute to ongoing patterns of secularization. While one can debate the actual existence of disenchantment, even a weakened enchantment, combined with other time pressures, can be enough to significantly disengage a number of people from religious involvement. This changed concept of time, I think, is key to recent trends toward secularization and stands to be exacerbated by automation and other coming shifts.

One of the main challenges, then, for contemporary Catholic theology and church life is to rearticulate the theological meaning of time for a new era and a new societal conception of time. The church has struggled with the “time is money” concept inculcated by the Industrial Revolutions and their notions of time, as Taylor’s work strongly indicates, but there are signs of new paradigm shifts in this area that in turn will require a reckoning. The secular concept of time described by Taylor is in danger, but its successor is yet to be determined.

Consumption and Consumerism: How Much Is Too Much?

To return to the catalog of Catholic thinkers dealt with in the first section of this paper, the one major point of agreement that one can find among them is that consumerism is a very bad thing. Pope Francis has relied heavily on the term “throw-away society” to describe consumerist culture, and this phrase has indeed found its way into Frank Trentmann’s important recent book *Empire of Things*. Using Trentmann as a resource, I want to explore this issue of consumerism and consumption against the background of the previous discussion of growth and the broader issue of secularization.

Empire of Things is a sweeping history of consumption, laying out the long view of worldwide patterns of consumption, in the West and elsewhere. Toward the end of his analysis, Trentmann deals very directly with the accusation that consumption is the enemy of religion, arguing that in fact religion largely advanced with modernization and consumption (608). It was also, he argues, a kind of development of doctrine in which Christian groups that traditionally suspected material goods began to embrace them (609). American churches, argues Trentmann, “turned the moral defence of prosperity into a business model,” giving rise both to the “Prosperity Gospel” and other modes of religious life such as televangelism and the megachurch (610).

Trentmann directly addresses the idea of a “throwaway society,” referring in fact to Pope Francis. According to Trentmann, our relationship to waste is problematic, but in a more complex way than this phrase might immediately suggest. During the postwar boom, consumer waste outpaced business attempts to combat waste and recycle (635). Consumer and industrial recycling, however, were both hampered by the drop in the price of materials (638). Still, however, commercial and industrial waste have dropped significantly faster than consumer waste, which has levelled off to 1970s levels since 2000 but has not decreased (642).

Food waste in particular, Trentmann notes, is quite normal under capitalism, but has become worse in recent decades given that food is wasted even while demand is high due to overbuying (649). Trentmann describes this waste as by and large a “by-product of the busy lifestyle,” creating a situation in which “fragmented social schedules override personal ethics and lead them to waste regardless” (651). The overall situation in the first world, Trentmann argues, is one in which “waste not, want not” has been replaced by “use more, recycle more” (652).

The bigger problem, Trentmann points out, is that talk of the throwaway society is often misplaced. As he puts it, “it is the busy, energy-hungry lives we lead at home and on the roads and in the air that are the real threat,” rather than insufficient recycling or everyday consumer waste. Ultimately, Trentmann argues, our lives are materially too intensive, particularly as the carbon and water in goods are not necessarily reflected in their prices (689). Consumption, then, is not always something we choose consciously to do – it is a form of social injustice, akin to racism and others, that is part and parcel of how people experience the world and society and as a result is much harder to set aside than a simple vice.

This discussion of Trentmann is significant to my broader analysis of economics and secularization because it points to the reality behind phrases such as “throwaway society” or an idolatry of money and goods. The throwaway mentality and the idolatry are dangerous precisely because they are soft and indirect. Their critical points are also not where they otherwise might appear to be, as evinced in recycling as symbolic of ecological concern. These are corrosive tendencies whose long-term effects on society are more drastic than their perhaps more noticeable short-term ones.

Consumption, then, exists in a more complicated relationship to religion than it might seem based on the critiques of consumerism dealt with above. Consumer society in the U.S. has been part and parcel of religion, but it has also imported its own logic. It has enabled the “religious market” that Finke and Starke have famously described, but it has also engendered the rise of the prosperity gospel, which Kate Bowler has referred to as a “decisive theological,

economic, and social force shaping American religion” (9). Christianity itself has thus come under the rubric of consumption, particularly in certain sectors of Protestantism that have embraced prosperity but in other churches, including the Catholic Church, as well.

Close analysis of consumption and consumerism thus demonstrate that they are pervasive but also hard to separate out from other religious and spiritual practices. To return to the earlier religious condemnation of consumerism, it is hard in the contemporary context to fully resist consumerism without embracing an almost sectarian mentality.³ Cavanaugh’s view comes closest to this approach; one of the challenges of Pope Francis has been his simultaneous strong challenge to the throwaway culture and his simultaneous rejection of sectarian approaches to church and world. This paradoxical approach tends toward embracing the challenge of reconciling these apparently opposite trajectories. Before turning to this issue, I would like to examine how the matters I have been discussing affect classical secularization theories and the mechanisms by which they envision this phenomenon taking place.

Classical Secularization Theories and New Economic Realities

At this point I would like to turn briefly to classical secularization theories, which have typically been based broadly on Max Weber’s theories, and whose paradigm tended to be twentieth-century Western Europe. These theories have waxed and waned, particularly in the American context, since the mid-1960s. Steve Bruce sums up a mature version of such theories when he argues that, “three things are causally related: the social importance of religion, the number of people who take it seriously, and how seriously anyone takes it” (3). Bruce helpfully indicates that what is at stake for his theory is not so much the existence of religious beliefs at all, which he does not see as particularly under threat, but rather, the plausibility of such beliefs as measured by their popularity (42-43).

For classical secularization theory, there is a basic correlation between economic prosperity in a society, particularly inasmuch as it is broadly shared, and secularization. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have updated this model to speak of “existential security” as distinct from economic comfort, but they are related (13). Economic comfort relieves people of the need to call upon gods for help to sustain their lives, and their lives become shaped by a secular, economic liturgical calendar rather than the rituals of the church. Such theories reacted in particular to secularizing trends in Europe in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, while perhaps underplaying the existential anxieties that accompanied the economic prosperity European nations experienced in this period. David Martin’s work, particularly his *General Theory of Secularization*, has effectively complicated some of the more simplistic aspects of this narrative by looking at various models of how church and society interacted, which in turn have played out in differing patterns of secularization.

The U.S. consistently presented a challenge to classic secularization theories in that its culture embraced consumption and economic growth more heartily than Europe’s and yet its religious character held fairly steady until recently after a 1960s dip. For some thinkers, such as rational-choice theorists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, this represented the triumph of

³ Dreher represents a popularization of such a sectarian vision that opposes not just the liberal sexual morality opposed by most conservative Christians but the whole late capitalist apparatus that erodes the Christian worldview through consumerism.

America's marketplace of denominations over European models in which religion had been historically associated with social strife. For others, such as Norris and Inglehart or Bruce, this represented an aberration which would be corrected in time given the inevitability of economic prosperity undercutting religion.

In retrospect, I think classical secularization theory neglected cultural differences between the U.S. and Western Europe, particularly with respect to the role of religion. In this sense, rational choice theorists have a limited point – in the U.S. cultural context, freedom of religion has nurtured a more vibrant religious culture. In the 1950s and early 1960s context, the U.S. was experiencing prosperity, and religion was part of this rather than in tension with it. In Europe, secularization took place during a time of economic prosperity and existential anxiety; the mid-1960s U.S. context was somewhat similar. Recent conditions, however, have diverged from this narrative.

In the U.S., then, it has been the convergence of economic anxiety and cultural stagnation from the “Great Recession” of 2008 and thereafter that has helped spur on secularization. This was set up by cultural changes such as suburbanization and accompanying disembeddings from urban and rural communities that might otherwise have correlated to secularization but did not immediately produce it in the U.S. context. Religion has already become significantly disembedded from its traditional community role, particularly among white Catholics, who increasingly lived in suburban contexts rather than the inner-city ethnic parishes characteristic of the Catholic “Golden Age” leading up to the 1950s. This decline in the social role of churches gave them less reason for existing, a situation which has parallels to David Martin's (199) observations about the Dutch church.

Secularizing trends since 2010, particularly among Catholics, have thus been jarring, but they did not come out of nowhere. It is my contention in this paper that the anti-humanist tendencies of the economy described above, combined with the failure of that economy to deliver on its own promises through the constrained vision of time and encouragement of excessive consumption described above, has led to a situation in which economic unease has become a defining feature of American and more broadly first-world culture. To use Norris and Inglehart's term, this is a kind of existential insecurity.

Why has this economic unease or anxiety not led to a greater interest in religion as it may have, for example, with the 1970s religious revival? I think, among Catholics at least, there are several reasons for this. First, Catholic affiliation with the church has been weakened by cognitive dissonance on matters of sexual morals, particularly in light of abuses of power by church leaders on other matters concerning sexuality. Second, the decline of a cohesive Catholic social nexus as existed in many cities and towns means that the church has a cultural connection to fewer and fewer people. That connection becomes an ideological or lifestyle choice and thus appeals to fewer people – it becomes more sectarian. The collapse of the “bad Catholic” in contemporary American society illustrates this – people increasingly view church affiliation as an ideological choice rather than a part of their identity. The economic and cultural dysfunction that slowed growth has helped to speed this falling out of the narrative. Economic and time pressures combined with a weakened confidence in the church as an institution and weaker connections to other Catholics plausibly add up to exactly the secularization narrative that has come about. What can be done about this?

Catholic Theological Anthropology and “The New Normal”

I am approaching this paper as a systematic theologian rather than an ethicist, but I would like to tease out some of the insights for theological anthropology that we can glean from this discussion. The language of Catholic economic discourse with regard to the secular has mostly tended to refer to economics as a kind of secular reality against which Catholic social teaching and other areas of church teaching are set. I want to argue, though, that there are important implications for theological anthropology.

How do economic realities play into secularization? For traditional secularization theories, they went in a fairly straight line – increased economic prosperity led inevitably to a more secular society as people enjoyed a higher standard of living and no longer needed or found time for religious observance. This theory is appealing in its simplicity but falls apart precisely in drawing too straight a line between realities that are surely related but not necessarily in such a direct way. It has been amply demonstrated, by Kevin Kruse among others, that prosperity in the 1950s U.S. brought with it a burgeoning religious culture that actually increased observance (137-38).

Why, then, has economic decline coincided with a period of increased secularization in American society on the whole and among Catholics in particular? One option would be to posit that in fact secularization has nothing to do with these economic realities – other factors, such as the previously discussed epochal shift in attitudes concerning about sexuality, were the main or sole causes. While, as mentioned earlier, I tend to think that sexuality ranks alongside economics as a factor here, it seems unlikely to me that these realities are totally unrelated, given the dominance of the economic sphere in everyday American life in the twenty-first century.

What I think is going on under these circumstances is a kind of tangled combination of economic precarity, individualism, and neoliberal consumerism that have combined to produce a vicious cycle of consumption and debt.⁴ This desperate situation is in a severe cognitive dissonance with a Catholic approach both to economics and to the good life more generally. As I will argue with regard to sexuality, this cognitive dissonance seems to be more severe than the traditional notions of “Catholic guilt” or the “bad Catholic” that sustained religious loyalty and basic affiliation amidst a crisis of obedience or faith.

Economic precarity is hardly a new phenomenon on a historical or global scale, but in the contemporary West it has emerged against the backdrop of higher economic expectations inspired by years of growth and prosperity. Large groups of people who expected to be part of a broad middle class instead find themselves in the lower middle class or worse. This economic precarity is exacerbated by individualism, which discourages people from relying on broader networks of community and solidarity to resist the challenges that economics brings. As Robert Putnam has described in *Our Kids* (2015), social capital has declined in many such contexts, and secularization has both resulted from and in turn accelerated this trend.

⁴ Packer has effectively illustrated this dynamic on the broader American scale, with relatively passing reference to religion.

From the perspective of Catholic theological anthropology, then, the figure of *homo economicus*, the human being wired to produce the greatest economic good for him-or-herself above all else, threatens mostly as a sort of ghost. Indeed, social theorists from Freud to Putnam have pointed out that economic interest clearly represents a fraction of the needs and interests that drive human activity. We are now living, then, in a kind of hangover period from the growth and consumption oriented society developed during the second Industrial Revolution and that peaked in the post-World War II boom. Consumerism is, in a sense, a kind of virus that has survived within society despite the evaporation of the original conditions that sustained it. In many cases, particularly the buildup of debt and desperate attempts to get out of it, it ravages as would such a virus. It also exists in conjunction with other maladies, particularly racism, that sustain and are in turn sustained by it.

Homo economicus, then, has been succeeded by a more desperate figure whose focus might very well still be on economics but whose realistic ability to attain economic goals has been severely undercut. The experience of brokenness through failure to live up to goals set by society has thus become one of the paradigms for the “new normal,” and one to which the church needs to respond with compassion. Henri Nouwen, in his work on spiritual living in a secular age, has argued that responding to our brokenness involves first befriending it and then putting it under the blessing (75). Responding to this brokenness means first and foremost engaging with it. This engagement, I would argue, is one of the key tasks for theology in the decades to come.

Conclusion: Toward a Catholic Economic Response to Secularization

To return to Pope Francis, it is clear that he is charting a course for Catholic social teaching to attempt to reckon with contemporary economic realities and the likely future of slower growth. In some ways, as Rushkoff has commented, this is a natural state of affairs for Catholic thought on this issue; it is a return to the medieval situation that served as the jumping-off point for Catholic social teaching and its response to the Industrial Revolution in the first place. Yet for Catholic theology to make a worthwhile contribution to reckoning with these issues, it must do so as more than a neo-medievalist vision.

I have argued in the course of this essay that contemporary trends of secularization in the U.S., particularly among Catholics, are due in good part to economic causes, particularly broader societal trends in which Catholics have been caught up. The concurrence of these changing economic realities with the inability of church teaching on sexuality to communicate effectively with its audience has alienated many people from the church, often into the category of “nones” or of church shoppers in Evangelical megachurches with very large membership rolls. This has been a loss for the church, certainly; the institutional decline and changed tone of the church due to secularization present challenges for those who remain. At the same time, however, this is a loss for those who leave; if the church is to be, in Francis’s terms, a field hospital for the wounded, it is important that those wounded feel free to enter.

It is thus fitting that Francis has hastened the retreat of the church from Christendom and toward the instantiation of a new approach to church and world that Vatican II began to chart. The challenge from a Catholic perspective is how the church can adapt to a world where even faded versions of the Christendom model in which everyone was assumed to be a practitioner of the faith no longer exists. Given that the church itself has developed its current

institutional structures within this culture, this is a painful situation. What is needed now is a vision of the human person that can be a palliative for the lingering virus of economic determinism and consumerism.

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