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16. Can Technology Forestall a Secular Future?

Jeffrey J. Maciejewski, Creighton University

Abstract

Recent research has presented evidence that among demographic groups, Millennials are reporting reduced levels of religious affiliation, of religiousness, or of religiosity. This has led some to characterize this decline as an increase in secularism. The issue is defined and approaches to operationalizing secularism are examined. Given that Millennials are often seen as being tech-savvy and heavy users of technology such as social media, Twitter and Facebook are considered as remedies for any increase in secularism. While it may be true that Millennials are to some extent dependent on technology, there is little evidence to suggest that technology can forestall increased secularism, particularly in view of the multi-faceted causes of religious disaffiliation.

Keywords: disaffiliation, Millennials, religiousness, secularism, social media

Introduction

Among the changes being thrust upon religions, dealing with followers who disaffiliate or who are increasingly less religious, are the needs for religious reform (i.e., doctrinal), church

reform (i.e., pastoral or liturgical), or perhaps both. At base, driving these needs are sobering realizations that church attendance has declined, and so has the number of people who identify with particular religions, particularly in recent decades. Among demographic groups, these declines have been most notable among Millennials (those born between 1981-1996). For example, recent research asserts that, compared to previous generations, Millennials are less likely to belong to a faith, and are less likely to attend religious services (see, e.g., Bengtson et al.; Cox, Navarro-Rivera and Jones; Jones, Cox and Banchoff). Moreover, Millennials are less likely also to say that religion is important in their lives, and are less approving of religious organizations. And these sentiments appear to hold true across faiths encompassing Christian and non-Christian religions alike.

Some suggest that one way to change these attitudes is through the use of technology, in particular the use of social media and mobile computing technologies. Lizardy-Hajbi proposes that the web and/or social media be used as a tool for maintaining connections and as a communication and organizing platform for young adult group activities. Moreover, she maintains that since young adults use social media as a primary means of building relationships, employing social media at both institutional and parish levels could be understood as a ministry in and of itself. Others have agreed expressing the belief that since faith is a full-time activity and social media is part of our everyday lives, it is not surprising that the two can overlap (Lewis).

Thus, the goal of this paper is to explore changing attitudes toward religion and how technology may (or may not) assist in reshaping these attitudes. I begin by exploring Millennial secularity and discussing its potential causes. I then address the potential of technology – in particular online and social media technologies – to affect Millennial secularity in both positive and negative ways. I conclude this paper with some observations on Millennial secularity and I offer suggestions for future research.

Defining Secularism

An important first step in exploring Millennial secularity is to operationalize – in some way – secularism. Its definitions are often far from precise, encompassing religious disaffiliation, a disinterest in spirituality or organized religion, a decline in levels of religiosity and church attendance, or some combination thereof. One approach is to consider lower levels of religiosity as being analogous to secularism. Generally speaking religiosity is a measure of the intensity and commitment of an individual's practice or participation in a religion, involving both devotional and participatory components (e.g., Ellison, Gay, and Glass; Gay and Lynxwiler). Therefore, researchers have tended to measure religiosity dimensionally using factors such as belief in the existence of God, biblical literalism, frequency of prayer and religious service attendance (see, e.g., Ellison, Gay, and Glass) or religious intensity, religious attendance, and religious beliefs/attitudes (see, e.g., Bengtson et al.) producing composite measures of religiosity. Twenge et al. take a far simpler approach, using a single measure of the importance of religion in one's life to determine one's level of religiosity. Yet such measures of religiosity imply at least some level of religiousness insofar as individuals may demonstrate varying degrees of religiosity without reporting a complete absence of religiousness that many would understand to be akin to secularism.

Religious affiliation (or disaffiliation) is another term that has been related to secularism. However, much like religiosity, it has been operationalized and measured statistically in different ways. Pew Research Center (2010, 2018) asked respondents to indicate their religious affiliation using response to one of 12 different religions, with the option of responding using an “unaffiliated” response (sub-divided into “religious unaffiliated,” “secular unaffiliated,” “atheist,” and “agnostic” responses). These were then used to develop a new typology of religious affiliation, categorizing respondents as “highly religious,” “somewhat religious,” or “non-religious,” the last of which comprised individuals who were either “religion resisters” or “solidly secular” (2018). Jones, Cox, and Banchoff similarly employed a measure of affiliation using response to six religions in addition to “unaffiliated” and “don’t know/other” options. Insofar as these approaches would appear to be valid measures of affiliation, they present a rather confusing mix of options for those who see themselves as disaffiliated: Are they simply unaffiliated? Or are they religious unaffiliated, secular unaffiliated, or perhaps atheist or agnostic? Smith and Cimino side-step the difficulty altogether using the terms “secular” and “secularists” to refer to atheists, agnostics, and other individuals and groups that are actively nonreligious while not necessarily self-identifying as atheist.

Taylor offers a more robust three-part conception of secularism, which he terms “secularization theory.” Characteristic of the present scene, it is driven by pluralism: “of outlooks, religious and non- and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end” (437). Springing from the expansion of standard education, the spread of literacy, and higher levels of schooling (in particular a growth in university training), but also from developments in communication and technology that have collapsed distances, both physical and ideological, these “positions” function as informed worldviews that then shape or influence beliefs and belief systems. The “humanist alternative” is but one example (423). Thus, he sees subsequent secularity as multi-faceted, consisting of (1) a retreat of religion in public life; (2) a decline in belief and practice; and (3) a change in some of the conditions of belief. Although Taylor’s project cannot be adequately summed up here, he concedes that “Everyone can see that there have been declines in practice and declared belief in many countries, particularly in recent decades; that God is not present in public space as in past centuries, and so on for a host of other changes” (426).

Given these ambiguities I assert that secularism can be understood as a period of time or as a belief system characterized by religious disaffiliation, agnosticism, atheism, or any combination thereof, with the understanding that these characterizations represent widely different values. That is, in line with Taylor’s decline in practice and declared belief, under the guise of secularity there may be individuals who do not affiliate with any recognized or organized religion but who nonetheless harbor some level of religiousness (i.e., disaffiliation), or who neither believe nor disbelieve in a god or God (i.e., agnosticism), or who do not believe in a god and thus do not possess any level of religiousness whatsoever (i.e., atheism).

Is There an Increase in Secularism?

However, my concern here is not to develop and articulate a nuanced definition of secularism. Rather, it is to ask whether any current state of secularism is real, and if it is to consider the extent to which technology (specifically social media) may be used to address it. Empirical evidence certainly suggests there are declining levels of religiosity and religious

affiliation, particularly among Millennials. An oft-cited 2010 study found that compared to other demographic groups Millennials are less likely to belong to or identify with a particular religion. Although the majority of respondents did report some religious affiliation, the study concluded that levels of disaffiliation among Millennials was increasing over time (Pew Research Center 2010).

A longitudinal examination of adolescents from 1966 to 2014 largely supported the findings in the Pew study (Twenge et al.). In this study, recent birth cohorts were less approving of religious organizations, were less likely to feel religion was important in their lives, were less spiritual, and spent less time praying or meditating, leading the study's authors to claim that there is "a movement toward secularism among a growing minority" (Twenge et al.: 10). However, like the Pew study, the majority of adolescents in the longitudinal investigation reported being religious. So despite the apparent fact that most Millennials report being in some way religious, that more Millennials appear to be less religious would indicate (because of their young age) that any period of secularism may be long-lasting.

Noting a persistent decline in religious worship service attendance among 15 to 26 year-olds from 2000 to 2007 (as an ersatz measure of secularism), Smith et al. expressed the same concern. Tracking cohorts as part of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth found that 40 percent of 15 year-old Catholics attended weekly religious services compared to less than 10 percent of 26 year-olds. The same marked decline was observed of Protestants, of whom 50 percent attended weekly services at age 15 in contrast to less than 20 percent at age 26. Revealing their concerns about any potential long-lasting turn away from religion or the church, they write:

. . . if falling rates of Catholic participation in Mass are primarily due to birth cohort replacement, as the evidence suggests – without the influence of some other dramatic force of change – we can expect further declines in Mass participation in the future as older cohorts of American Catholics pass away and are replaced by younger cohorts. This process will continue for some time into the future, even if recent birth cohorts have finally "bottomed out" and the religious participation of future emerging cohorts is not even lower (56).

It remains unclear, however, if these findings pertain only to Millennials and if declining worship service attendance can be reliably linked to religious disaffiliation. Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones, for example, report that from 2003 to 2013, the proportion of religiously unaffiliated Americans more than doubled, from 8 percent in 2003 to 22 percent in 2013. That this increase in disaffiliation appeared equally distributed among age groups seems to cast at least some doubt on the extent of Millennial disaffiliation. In contrast other research suggests that middle-aged Americans remain more or less religious. One survey of 4,729 U.S. adults with a median age of 47 found that 39 percent of those surveyed were highly religious and 32 percent were somewhat religious, with 29 percent of the sample being non-religious (Pew Research Center 2018). Thus, according to Pew's findings, more than 70 percent of adults are either high religious or somewhat religious.

Can Technology Help?

Given the wide disparity in evidence it seems difficult to make any firm conclusions about Millennial secularism or religious disaffiliation. However, if it is nonetheless possible to suggest that this is a period marked by increased religious disaffiliation or decreasing levels of religiosity, particularly among Millennials, and if this demographic group is indeed “Net Generation” (have grown up with the domestication of the Internet and are thus more technologically savvy than previous generations), then is it possible that technology can help forestall any increase in secularism? Without reporting on increases in smartphone adoption and daily smartphone use (to name only two data points), which would lie beyond the scope of this paper, anecdotal evidence certainly supports Millennials’ obsession with technology, in particular smartphones, tablets, and the sophisticated software they employ. Thus, if we are witnessing increasing levels of religious disaffiliation as some form of secularism among Millennials, and if this demographic finds technology to be very appealing, then it seems quite plausible that technology be used to slow or reverse this trend.

One possibility are social media, which have been employed by church leaders and individual parishes to stimulate engagement and improve communications. To that end Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Archbishop of Constantinople are active Twitter users. The Church of England has used the platform to stimulate engagement. During Easter celebrations in 2016, the Church encouraged its Twitter followers to share their images of baptisms, church services, and celebrations (Lewis). At least one German Protestant church uses Twitter regularly during masses as a way to encourage interaction (Nicholson). The purpose of using Twitter in these cases, Lewis asserts, is to disrupt the conventional top-down model of preaching Christianity via trained priests, using social media to enable followers to have one-to-one conversations about their faith with others, including non-believers. To illustrate its perceived potential, she reported the observations of one Church of England minister:

This provides a much more realistic picture of the church as a collection of followers of Jesus rather than a monolithic organization which occasionally pronounces unfavorably on contemporary society and is, in turn, judged by its organizational failures. Jesus often encountered people individually. Social media gives us the same personal access to people. This is an every-member ministry, and it’s exciting and inspiring.

Beyond Twitter, Facebook has offered a way to connect followers and congregants, with some parishes streaming services to help reach those who cannot attend services in person. In one case a severe tropical storm prompted several Hong Kong churches to stream their services on Facebook to congregants who were unable to attend traditional services (Cheung). In a similar fashion, some churches function solely online. Ostrowski studied the UK-based Church of Fools, which offers online services wherein “users select their username and avatar, enter the sanctuary with other members, and can sit quietly, speak with other people, and in the near future might even take Holy Communion with the virtual minister” (1).

There are doubtless many other examples of churches and parishes using Twitter or Facebook or existing entirely online to communicate with followers or to service those who cannot physically attend worship services. Regardless, if Millennial secularism is in fact a

quantifiable issue, is digital communications technology such as social media capable of solving it? Despite the instinctive use of social media as a way to engage tech-savvy Millennials at the church and parish levels, there is no apparent evidence – empirical or otherwise – to connect religious disaffiliation with any lack of social media presence. Put simply, those who report that they are not affiliated with any religion do not claim “If only my church used Facebook,” or “if only the archbishop were more active on Twitter,” or “if only my church used Twitter during mass.” Rather, as Waters and Bortree concluded in their study of Millennials’ relationships with religious institutions, the key to increasing Millennials’ involvement with organized religion is to increase their feelings of trust and satisfaction (210). And if this be the case, then addressing the declines in practice (if not belief) that form one leg of Taylor’s secularization theory may be more a matter of reforms necessary at both organizational and doctrinal levels.

However, it is unclear if technology such as social media is capable of such a remedy. That is, factors contributing to increasing levels of religious disaffiliation may be beyond the reach of technology per se. In their research of decade-long changes in American attitudes about same-sex marriage and LGBT issues, Cox, Navarro-Rivera, and Jones found that 58 percent of Americans agree that religious groups are alienating young people by being too judgmental on gay and lesbian issues. Similarly, the same study found that 70 percent of Millennials believe that religious groups are alienating young adults by being too judgmental on gay and lesbian issues. In another measure of disaffiliation, the study also found that among Millennials who no longer identify with their childhood religion, nearly one-third said that negative teachings about, or treatment of, gay and lesbian people was either a somewhat important or very important factor in their disaffiliation from religion. To be clear, however, this study focused solely on same-sex marriage and LGBT issues as but a single potential source of religious disaffiliation.

Others seem to question the validity of the current state of secularism. Gelfgren has suggested that what we are witnessing is not a trend toward secularism per se, but is instead a reflection of increasing religious pluralism. Seeing the religious not as followers but as consumers, he asserted this is not secularism, but rather is a “religious market” that has grown and become more differentiated. Campbell has asserted it is a matter of “convergent practice” facilitated by the Internet, wherein the Internet serves as a spiritual hub, allowing practitioners to select from a vast array of resources and experience in order to assemble and personalize their religious behavior and beliefs. From this point of view, she claims that online technology use and choices cannot be dis-embedded from offline contexts which requires looking at how offline practices guide online beliefs and behaviors. Moreover, some wonder if the preponderance of anecdotal evidence and descriptive research may itself be helping to form a socially constructed reality that may or may not actually comport with what we might know to be closer to the actual truth. And, as Smith et al. propose, this may have consequences in forming (and perhaps reproducing through self-fulfilling) parental expectations, youth self-images, and resource allocations of religious organizations.

Conclusion

Anecdotally, regular church-goers are likely to report that there appear to be fewer younger people attending mass. However, more than anecdotal evidence is needed to explore

Millennial secularism, its causes, and what if anything can be done to help slow it or reverse it. To that end, more resources must be directed to exploring the matter of secularism so as to not merely describe it as a phenomenon, but to attempt to uncover its root causes. Unfortunately, given the socially and psychologically complex nature of religious praxis, the causes of secularism will likely be manifest and difficult to pin down in ways that are quantifiable, reliable, and capable of being acted upon. Thus, more research must be undertaken to explore the highly nuanced nature of secularism, particularly among Millennials. Similarly, more research must be done to discover the relationship between technology, social media use, and levels of religiosity and disaffiliation, in order to better understand how (and if) these technologies may be employed to slow or reverse trends toward an increase in secularism, particularly among Millennials. Doing so will help shed light on any needs for reform and if so, where these reforms must be directed.

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