

IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies

Volume 5

Issue 1

2022



International Islamic University Malaysia

IUM JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND CIVILISATIONAL STUDIES
(E-ISSN: 2637-112X)

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Editorial Correspondence:

Editor, IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies (IJRCS)

Research Management Centre, RMC

International Islamic University Malaysia

53100 Gombak Campus

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: (+603) 6421 5002/5010

Fax: (+603) 6421 4862

Website: <http://journals.iium.edu.my/irkh/index.php/ijrcs>

Comments and suggestions to: alwialatas@iium.edu.my

E-ISSN: 2637-112X

Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia

P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Phone (+603) 6421-5018/5014, Fax: (+603) 6421-6298

Website: <https://www.iium.edu.my/office/iiumpress>

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Book Review

Inglehart, R. *Religion's sudden decline: What's causing it, and what comes next?*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press (2020)

by Makmor Tumin

Secularization has accelerated in the Western Christendom and its impact is felt in various parts of the world including the Muslim countries. In the Middle East, the mixed phenomenon of the Arab Spring portrays the diverse response towards secularization in the Muslim world. In this book, the author claims that instead of USA, the country most known for its practice of liberalism, Nordic countries have consistently been at the forefront of cultural changes and can provide some ideas as to what lies ahead when it comes to secularism or religiosity.

Nearly all modern indicators of wellbeing are in favor of Nordic countries and the Netherlands, including the social democratic welfare system together with universal health coverage. A high level of support from the state for education, welfare, childcare and pensions provides a high psychological security, with anticipated consequences of social solidarity.

However, these Nordic countries are also characterized by their rapidly declining religiosity. Hence, from a religious standpoint, these locations are pretty much havens for immorality. Does this stimulate the presence of religious corruption and nihilism? Apparently, as the author asserted, nihilism may not present itself, but I would argue instead that the emerging existentialism cannot be outrightly rejected. In other words, what may come into play is not that of Nietzsche's, but Sartre's or de Beauvoir's.

Beginning with gender equality, the emphasis on individual choice has been widely embraced by the people in these Nordic countries as they are now in support of homosexuality as well as tolerance toward divorce and abortion. These are symptomatic of said nihilism. A decline in the belief of God and the Afterlife as well as the dwindling public confidence in churches are obvious signs of existentialism. In short, existentialists believe in the individual choice of deciding what to do, what to be and what to feel.

This book comprises of 10 chapters. It is an attempt to explain the sudden decline of religiosity, theorizing the cause and its impacts in the coming years. Chapter 1 provides the gist of the whole book, discussing about the norms of Pro-Fertility and Individual Choice. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 serve as an extended discussion of the author's two earlier works, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Norris & Inglehart, 2004/2011) as well as *Giving Up on God: The Global Decline of Religion* (Inglehart, 2020).

Chapter 2 discusses how and why religion matters. To my mind, the discussion neglects the importance of religious authenticity in its debate and is rather understood in terms of merely utility. The author continues the idea with the belief that the greater security of modern life has reduced the need for the kind of psychological support offered by a religious belief system which in the past had provided help when there were no social security systems available to cope with unwanted conditions.

In Chapter 3, the debate of secularism as a result of existential security was placed as the primary cause against other explanations. These include arguments stating that religion would decline as scientific knowledge increases, and specific to religions in the West, established churches were becoming complacent and the diminishing importance of religious institutions simply reflected a change towards a more individualistic form of faith.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6's discussions can be grouped into the following. They explain how Evolutionary Modern Theory and secularization prove the logic of existential security and how they relate to the topic of individual choice. This is then followed by a discussion on four classifications of secularization; modern ideology, modernization and social title, existential security, and religious market.

Chapter 7 provides an interesting and useful insight. Secularization normally occurs at the pace of intergenerational population replacement; it can reach a tipping point where the dominant opinion shifts, and the forces of conformism and social desirability start to favor the outlook they once opposed, hence producing rapid cultural change. To my observation, having gone through the chapter, the dominant opinion which prevailed in the West is obviously not nihilism, but rather as eluded earlier, existentialism.

Perhaps the many discussions on Nordic achievements in chapter 8 is rather an explanation of existentialism itself. In chapter 8, the main idea of existentialism, as highlighted in this review, is the most apparent. The author rejects the possibility of America or China being the best candidate for the future most irreligious nations due to the available data on wellbeing and purity of life. However, when it comes to the belief in God and the Afterlife, as well as public confidence in churches, they are among the most unbelieving of nations, coming in at the bottom and therefore, the most obvious haven for existentialism.

Chapter 9 takes a different turn as it discusses the arguably peaceful regions of the Nordic countries. Data indicates that Sweden was the first country which had reached the tipping point, departing from fertility norms to individual choice norms. However, it is in Sweden that the current economic and physical insecurity had triggered hatred and xenophobia.

It is in Chapter 10 that the author discusses the idea of what comes next. It seems that the author strongly wants to make a case, rather than a suggestion, that reactions against leading fundamentalists' unconditional support for xenophobic authoritarian politicians, the Roman Catholic Church's long history of covering up child abuse, and terrorism by religious extremists, all seem to be contributing to the decline of world religiosity. To be sure, no one knows what the future may hold, but the fertility rate norms speak volume on this subject. This research indicates that secular countries favor individual choice norms using the indicators of homosexuality, divorce and abortion. These three indicators imply that there is little to be said about the replacement level for this group, hence their population will shrink in the future. This also implies that the world will be populated by

religious people regardless of their persuasion or those who believe in God without belonging to any particular religion.

On another side note, another important finding of this book besides the trend of religious decline in the Nordic regions and the Netherlands is the case of USA, in which prior to 2007, it is known that the trend of religiosity in this country was steadily increasing despite being an outlier of the Western Christendom. However, the following data presented by the author speaks volume about the trend. The percentage of Americans who never attended religious services was more than double in 2017, and the number of those who said that they have “a great deal” of confidence in America’s churches has fallen by almost 75 percent. In 1982, 83 percent of Americans described themselves as religious, and this has dropped to 55 percent in 2017. In 1982, 52 percent of Americans professed that God was “very important in their lives.” In 2017, only 23 percent gave the same answer.

The last message of the book before I situate my point is regarding the discussion on the sudden decline of religion. This sudden decline should not be understood in terms of the level of religiosity, but rather its trend only. Meanwhile, religiosity among Muslim countries has remained at a stable level.

I have a few things to say regarding this book. It is indeed very true as the author insisted, that there is no such thing as self-indulgence or immoral nihilism spreading in the West especially in the Nordic countries. However, the indicators for individual choice are more than a first step towards nihilism.

In this review, I argue that what had actually happened in the West is a systematic development of existentialism, in which the grand ideas of philosophy and religion were rejected. People are instead, free to do what they want to do, be what they want to be or feel what they want to feel. What else could it be? The authentic life according to existentialists is the life that we want to really choose. The authentic life following the existentialists’ logic is a life where the individual is free to choose, and this include choices of homosexuality, abortion and divorce, where they have freedom in choosing what they want to do, be and feel.

Secondly, existentialism or authenticity seems to be at the core of this book. Although this is unintentional, the benefit of religion in this book is reduced only in terms of its utility, neglecting the importance of authenticity. Hence, the benefit of religion is measured in terms of how much it reduces conflict and establishes clear and beneficial moral guidelines as well as whether it improves mental health and encourages people to work together. Modernization brings economic development, democratization, and growing social tolerance which are conducive to happiness since they give people more freedom of choice in how to live their lives.

Thirdly, the author has made a very clear statement on how the dominant opinion is constantly changing and therefore, causing the cultures of the people to change. I would take this assertion of the sudden decline in religion particularly in the West as the result of the existentialists' dominant opinion. This is what makes the Nordic regions Nordic and new religiosity in America American. This assertion or hypothesis should be taken by religious people to shield their society from individual choice being indiscriminately accepted and continue to educate on the importance of marriage or according to the author, fertility, to be accepted. The dominance of existential values - particularly among the young - is pushing more and more people away from religion, and it cannot be said that this is not happening even in Muslim countries.

Lastly, I want to take on the following quotation from the book:

“Although within most countries religious people are happier than less religious people, the people of modernized but secular countries are happier than the people of less modernized but highly religious countries. Thus, though religion is conducive to happiness under premodern conditions, once high levels of economic development become possible, the modern strategy can be even more effective than the traditional strategy as a way to maximize happiness.”

The statement indicates that the author's idea of religion is devoid of any concept of happiness in the World After. In other words, although he is not anti-religious, he denies the affiliation of happiness to religiosity as human civilization progresses.