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Rising Security and Religious Decline: Refining and Extending Insecurity Theory

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Explaining the reasons—while not the causes—behind religious decline is a central issue for sociologists interested in secularization processes. Many theoretical perspectives have been proposed over the last decades, and this article focuses on one of them. In particular, it refers to the so-called insecurity theory, formalized by Norris and Inglehart (2011), which reads processes of religious decline in light of the increased security coming with modernization. It summarizes the empirical evidence proposed so far by distinguishing between individual and contextual insecurity and static and longitudinal approaches. Moreover, it underlines the difference between economic and existential insecurity as well as the leading role of socialization processes. From this basis, it provides a summary of the main potential weaknesses of the theory and the main criticisms leveled against it, in order to expand its theoretical relevance and clarify what insecurity theory can, and cannot, tell us about secularization processes.

Key words: insecurity; secularization; religiosity; modernization.

Few words in the social sciences have as much theoretical breadth as the term "secularization." This concept refers to a variety of related social and political phenomena, one of which is the decline of individual religiosity. Recent sociological literature widely accepts that this process is happening as younger, less religious generations are replacing older ones (Molteni and Biolcati 2022; Schwadel 2010; Voas and Chaves 2016). Additionally, it is recognized that there is an "intermediate" or "fuzzy" step in the transition from fully religious to secular societies (Brauer 2018; Storm 2009; Voas 2009). Together, these insights suggest that the decline in personal religiosity and the corresponding "secular transition" are driven primarily by the ineffectiveness of religious socialization

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(Kelley and de Graaf 1997; Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo 2019; Voas 2008; Voas and Storm 2021).

The body of knowledge that has developed over recent decades, particularly concerning Europe and the USA, is noteworthy. It provides answers to the two main questions of *what* has occurred (religious decline) and *how* it has occurred (through generational replacement). However, two other questions remain unanswered, including the big one: *why* is religiosity declining? And lastly, *where*?

This article addresses exactly these two main questions. Specifically, in order to try to answer the *why* question, it reviews empirical literature around one of the main theories advanced in recent years: the so-called *insecurity theory*, refined and formalized by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in their book *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (2011). Even though many references will be made throughout the text, this article is not a mere literature review, but rather an attempt to (1) clarify the various nuances of the theory, (2) systematize the different ways in which it can be tested and the corresponding findings, and (3) highlight potential weaknesses and criticisms. From this basis, the final step will be to evaluate what the theory can, and cannot, tell us about secularization processes, particularly when expanding the perspective to include countries beyond the Western world.

SECULARIZATION, MODERNIZATION, AND THE THEORETICAL BASES OF INSECURITY THEORY

This article and insecurity theory itself are rooted in the framework of secularization as a by-product of modernization. The underlying idea may seem simple but it conceals a lot of complexity: modernization processes such as increased prosperity, better education and health, weakened social bonds, and increased rational and scientific thinking, undermine the relevance of religion, the extent to which people engage in religious practice and express their beliefs (Bruce 2002), and the stability and vitality of religious communities, practice, and convictions (Pollack 2008).

Because modernization is such a broad and all-embracing phenomenon, the main challenge in linking it to secularization is to understand which aspects (or subprocesses) impact religious decline. While such processes are clearly strongly interrelated, it is nevertheless worthwhile to distinguish between and summarize them in order to develop a more precise set of empirical tests and, correspondingly, a clearer research agenda. This should be seen as a useful way of framing the relationship between modernization and secularization as comprehensively as possible, without losing too much of its inherent complexity. Despite the difficulties arising from various terminological, substantive, and theoretical issues, at least four common points can be identified (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Subprocesses of Modernization Undermining People's Religiosity

Economic and material development and increasing security
More economic, political, and social security
Fewer individual and societal risks
(Brauer 2018; Hirschle 2013; Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Molteni 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2011; Rees 2009; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Smith 2017; Solt at al. 2011; Stolz and Tanner 2019)
Institutional change
Social differentiation (different functional systems in competition)
Democratization (vs. authoritarian/traditional regimes)
Bureaucratization (states take over religious functions—welfare included)
(Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004; Inglehart and Welzer 2005; Luhmann 1982; Scheve and Stasavage 2006; Stolz and Tanner 2019; Wilson 1982)
Cultural change/increased rationality and scientific worldviews
Modernization of ideologies
Increased education and schooling
Nonreligious options (and explanations) for solving problems
(Berger 2014; Brauer 2018; Joas 2014; Pollack 2008; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Stolz and Tanner 2019; Taylor 2007; Weber 1922; Wuthnow 2012)
Diminishing strength of communities
Modernization of social ties
Less control from—religious—communities
Fewer sanctions, religious socialization less effective
(Durkheim [1912] 1964; Kelley and de Graaf 1997; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Wilson 1982)

The Theoretical Bases of Insecurity Theory

This article will specifically focus on the first theoretical block, comprising the group of theories that identify the amelioration of material conditions as the main driver of secularization and religious decline. The central idea may appear simple, but it hides a lot of complexity. The main point is that the more insecure people feel, the more religious they will be. Therefore, an improvement in human security would result in a decrease in religiosity. "Feelings of vulnerability to physical, societal and personal risks are a key factor directly driving religiosity," Norris and Inglehart say (2011:4). Religion, in this sense, can be intended as a sort of tool, a "sacred canopy" (Berger 1967) that helps people make sense of their lives in the face of insecurity and adversities.

The connection between insecurity and religiosity is believed to exist because religious belonging, rituals, and beliefs can offer comfort during times of stress or insecurity. Studies have demonstrated that religiosity can serve as an effective means of coping with adversity (Pargament 1997), and that, in situations of risk, people "seek comfort in the idea that their suffering may have meaning and/or that a higher power will ultimately protect them" (Fairbrother 2014:8).

Already early *anthropologists* noticed how religious or magical rituals were utilized to give people a sense of control and alleviate the anxiety associated with daily tasks, such as fishing or agriculture (Homans 1941; Malinowski 1948). It was also observed that this "magic" became less important as tasks and activities became "certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes" (Malinowski 1948:116).

Psychologists and *social psychologists* are also interested in the role of religion as a coping mechanism, classifying it as one of the strategies for managing stress. Everyone experiences stress at some point in their lives, and coping strategies are the methods individuals use to avoid physical, psychological, or emotional damage (Wheaton 1997). Stressful events often leave people feeling helpless and without the resources to cope (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), making religion a valuable resource. The psychology field generally recognizes the positive impact of religion on coping, as it can shape an individual's perception of "situational meaning" (Skaggs and Barron 2006) and provide "grounding" (Pargament 1997), namely a sense of psychological balance and optimism. Many studies (Clark and Lelkes 2005; Diener, Tay, and Myers 2011; Ellison 1991), including meta-analyses (Hackney and Sanders 2003; Pargament 2002), have demonstrated the benefits of religion on well-being. With specific regard to coping, religious strategies have been shown to provide positive beliefs (Krok 2015), reevaluation of stressors (Beagan, Etowa, and Bernard 2012), and a buffer against stress through prayer, meditation, and social support networks within religious communities (Beagan, Etowa, and Bernard 2012; Brandt and Henry 2012; Gall et al. 2005). This buffering effect of religion has also been confirmed by a meta-analysis conducted by Ano and Vasconcelles (2005).

One of the merits of *sociologists* dealing with the notion of religious coping strategies has been to fruitfully identify and summarize three ways in which religion can act as a buffer. Religion can work as a stress-buffering system by providing social capital and social support via religious communities. This kind of support can be inherently (1) *social* (Ellison and George 1994; Lim and Putnam 2010; Olson 1989; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990) and *informational* (Taylor and Chatters 1988), but also (2) *financial* (Ager and Ciccone 2015; Dehejia, DeLeire, and Luttmer 2007; Lipford and Tollison 2003; Stolz 2009; Storm 2017b). In addition, religion can work purely at the (3) *cognitive* level (Ellison et al. 2001; Krause 2009; Pollner 1989; Zuckerman, Kasl, and Osfeld 1984). Generally speaking, sociologists (but also some economists) are particularly interested in the social and economic benefits of religion, while psychologists focus on the cognitive level.

In addition to this distinction, sociologists have also introduced two elements that help to further develop the insecurity theory and produce testable hypotheses. Firstly, the differentiation between *egotropic* and *sociotropic* risks, introduced by

Norris and Inglehart (2011), and widely used in later works, maintains that both individual situations (e.g., unemployment, poor health) and societal factors (e.g., pandemics, economic crises, widespread disaster) can impact people's religiosity. Secondly, moving forward from the original formulation, a distinction is made between *existential* and *economic* insecurity (Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011), in which economic insecurity refers to an individual's position in the market economy (e.g., poverty, unemployment) (Vail 1999), while existential insecurity concerns life-threatening conditions (e.g., poor health, loss of a loved one). Clearly, ego- and sociotropic risks and the two types of insecurity can overlap, as existential insecurity—in the same way as economic insecurity—can occur at both the individual and societal level.

Before delving into the empirical evidence, a final point must be emphasized. Despite the close relationship between the sociological and psychological perspectives, there is a key difference between them. Psychologists are primarily concerned with examining the relationship between individual religiosity, well-being, and psycho-physiological health during or after a stressful event, while sociologists assume that religion plays a positive coping role and examine the link between religiosity and individual and societal characteristics, as well as changes in religiosity due to changes in these factors. This difference is crucial for the overall argument. The fact that religion can help with coping (as the psychologists show) does not necessarily mean that people *turn* religious or increase their religiosity when faced with adversity. It may be that only those who are already religious utilize their "religious tools" (Swidler 1986) to cope with adversities.

INSECURITY THEORY AND EMPIRICAL TESTS

One of the key challenges in making a thorough examination of theories such as insecurity theory is their soundness: they are based on reasonable theoretical claims, and often come with strong empirical associations that seem almost unquestionable.

However, as will be seen, the devil is not only in the details, but mainly in the way the ideas are presented. As previously stated, insecurity theory is a theory of social change, meaning its primary goal should be to explain changes in religiosity that result from changes in (in)security. This theory is built on two main foundations: first, the observation that the countries that are most religious are less developed and modern, and second, the vast amount of social-psychological literature arguing that religious values, behaviors, and supernatural beliefs can be beneficial for individuals facing life-threatening situations. The central premise of insecurity theory essentially combines these two foundations and "uses" the second to explain the first. However, in order to label changes in insecurity as one of the main drivers of secularization, the theory needs a much stronger empirical foundation.

TABLE 2 How to Tackle the Insecurity Theory: Issues and Potential Research Questions

	Static (between units)	Longitudinal (within units)
Contextual insecurity	A—Are more secure and developed countries less religious? Are people living in developed countries less religious?	B—Is growing contextual security linked to a decrease in religiosity?
Individual insecurity	C—Are people experiencing personal insecurity more religious?	D—Does a worsening individual situation result in an increase in that person's religiosity?

From the previous section, it should already be clear that there are two main theoretical and empirical nodes when it comes to testing the theory: on the one hand, the *source of insecurity*, which can be both contextual (e.g., living in a poor country, an experience of war) and individual (e.g., being poor, eventually also in a rich country); on the other, the issue of *time*, which makes the need to supplement static analyses (differences between units) with longitudinal[1] ones (differences within units over time) quite pressing. A table (table 2) combining the two nodes can be used as a guide to present all the findings that have been proposed so far:

While nodes A and B primarily focus on insecurity theory as a macro-societal thesis, node D (and node C in part) primarily explore it as a micro-individual thesis by focusing principally on individual psychological mechanisms.

Contextual Insecurity and the Static Approach

In their outstanding work on the determinants of worldwide differences in church attendance, Ruiter and van Tubergen (2009:885) affirmed that "almost 40% of the variation in religious attendance is due to the country in which people live." From this and many other contributions, the importance of focusing on some country characteristics when trying to explain levels of religiosity clearly emerges.

This group of contributions encompasses two different types of research: some examine the relationship between countries' characteristics and their average religiosity (ecological analyses), and some examine the relationship between countries' characteristics and individual religiosity (multilevel approach).[2] Although the multilevel approach is able to control for potential individual confounders, both approaches have often yielded similar results: religiosity is strongly related to countries' characteristics of insecurity.

[1]By "longitudinal," I mean contributions which explicitly test for within-unit changes, and not those making longitudinal claims with cross-sectional data and designs.

[2]For a useful diagram of the different levels involved in insecurity theory, see figure 1 in Ruiter and van Tubergen (2009).

The first empirical evidence came directly from Norris and Inglehart (2011) who showed that attendance to religious services, prayer, and the importance attached to religion were higher in poor agrarian societies than in wealthy post-industrial ones. They found that religious participation and prayer were positively correlated with income inequality, the proportion of the population living in rural areas, adult illiteracy, and child/infant mortality rates, and negatively correlated with the Human Development Index (HDI), the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, education level, and number of doctors per 100,000 people. These results were confirmed by Molteni (2021), who analyzed the relationship between religion and factors such as HDI, life expectancy, GDP, average schooling, and income inequality.

Moving onto the multilevel approach (contextual characteristics having an impact on individual religiosity), research has shown a positive association between individual religiosity and lower levels of human development (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Molteni 2021). An association has also been seen with lower GDP (Storm 2017a; van Ingen and Moor 2015), lower welfare spending/availability (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004; Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Storm 2017a), higher income inequality (Fairbrother 2014; Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Molteni 2021; Rees 2009; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Solt, Habel, and Grant 2011), and higher unemployment rates (Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011). On the more existential side, by contrast, links have been found between higher religiosity and lower life expectancy (Molteni 2021; van Ingen and Moor 2015), war experiences (Du and Chi 2016; Henrich et al. 2019; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Sosis and Handwerker 2011; van Tubergen, Kosyakova, and Kanas 2023), and frequent natural disasters (Zapata 2018).

Two key theoretical considerations emerge from these contributions. Firstly, many authors reported having to exclude macro-level predictors due to collinearity, highlighting the challenge of distinguishing the impact of the different aspects of modernization. Secondly, there are indications that there may be a (stronger) relationship between insecurity and religiosity in certain regions, countries, historical periods, and circumstances. For example, Molteni (2021) found that the link between HDI and religiosity was stronger in the poorest countries, and weaker in the richest. van Ingen and Moor (2015) noted that while income inequality and urbanization were key drivers of change in the 1970s and 1980s, since 1990 this has not been the case. Immerzeel and van Tubergen (2011) suggested that the effects of macro-level factors were more pronounced when comparing very diverse countries, and tended to disappear when comparing similar countries like those in Europe. Norris and Inglehart (2011) also reported similar observations. This will be further explored in the discussion section.

In any case, even though the strength of this relation has been found to vary between regions, countries, and historical periods, empirical studies that examine contextual security through a static approach consistently show that people's religiosity is strongly related to countries' characteristics.

Contextual Insecurity and the Longitudinal Approach

The effects of changing contextual situations on people's religiosity can be investigated and interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, secularization can be viewed as a long-term, gradual process in which evolving societal characteristics and processes of religious decline occur together over time. On the other hand, the focus can be sudden, large, and disruptive events that may act as exogenous shocks affecting people's religiosity. Whichever slant is taken, a reliable and robust empirical examination requires a specific design[3] and data that can test for longitudinal changes.

Considering secularization and religious change to be long-term, slow processes, Storm (2017a) provided a good example by showing how the relationship between economic growth and religious decline became nonsignificant when time was included in the model (to control for unobserved time-related phenomena), but also that an increase in government spending on social benefits was linked to a decline in church attendance, even after controlling for time. van Ingen and Moor (2015) also relied on a similar design (macro-level panel regressions) to examine the effects of changes in societal characteristics on church attendance, and found that increases in GDP and life expectancy had a significant negative effect on religiosity while changes in social benefit expenditure and income inequality had not.[4] Relatedly, te Grotenhuis et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of a within-country focus, as between-country comparisons can be misleading due to unobserved country characteristics. They showed that changes in social security spending could sometimes positively or negatively affect church attendance, with an average effect of zero, and that rising GDP seemed to reduce church attendance.

Interestingly, the results from these three contributions seem to contradict each other, but these apparent differences can be partially explained by the different countries represented in each study: a small sample of European countries in Storm (2017a), a worldwide group of Christian-majority countries in van Ingen and Moor (2015), and a subsample of affluent European countries (partially different from Storm's) in te Grotenhuis et al. (2015). Again, this issue will be further discussed in the discussion section.

Another relevant study is Hirschle (2013), which found that economic growth was negatively associated with religious practice but had no impact on religious values. Similarly, Molteni (2021) showed that the level of human development, income inequalities, and life expectancy of a country could explain religious differences between countries, but within-country changes in these factors over time could not. He also divided the analysis by continent and found that the between-country effects were not significant anymore, suggesting that contextual

[3]Four main empirical strategies are suitable for this: macro-level panel regressions or multilevel longitudinal models for the former, and quasi-experiment or panel designs for the latter.

[4]While not explicitly related to the insecurity theory, the two authors showed that the expansion of tertiary education was clearly the most powerful predictor of changes.

characteristics are more effective in explaining differences only between very different countries.

As far as studies that focus on the impact of major events on the whole population are concerned, there is a good mix of research focusing on both Western and non-Western countries. An example is the work by Sibley and Bulbulia (2012), which framed an earthquake that occurred between the 2009 and 2011 waves of a longitudinal probability sample in New Zealand as a natural experiment. They found that religious faith increased in the region most affected by the earthquake, while it declined elsewhere. Similarly, Chen (2010) found an increase in the attendance of Islamic and Koranic schools after the Indonesian financial crisis, but not in other social activities (including savings groups or alternative insurance mechanisms), and used this finding to argue that religion serves as a form of social and financial insurance. Another disruptive event that happened in the last decades was the 9/11 attack in the USA. Uecker (2008:1) showed that this attack "exerted only modest and short-lived effects on various aspects of young adults' religiosity and spirituality" and that no notable religious revival happened among American young adults after September 11. Bentzen (2019) investigated WVS data and data on natural disasters to show that only unexpected disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions, especially in regions otherwise rarely hit, increased religiosity. Foreseen disasters in frequently hit districts did not.

Considering recent unexpected events, it is essential to take into account the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given the proliferation of scientific articles exploring its potential relationship with religiosity. Indeed, many of these articles confirm that religiosity played a significant role during the pandemic, as summarized in the review by David et al. covering "all six WHO regions" (2022:2). To assess whether this corresponded to an increase in religiosity, Bentzen (2021) used worldwide Google search data to show a 30% increase in prayer during the pandemic, while Beyerlein, Nirenberg, and Zubrzycki (2021) found that one third of American believers reported that the COVID-19 outbreak strengthened their faith. Kanol and Michalowski (2023) interestingly reported an increase in religiosity in Germany during the pandemic. However, it related to individual insecurity but not to social insecurity. Similar findings are also present in Büssing, Baumann, and Surzykiewicz (2022), who added that trust in a higher power, along with prayer and meditation, decreased during the second wave of the pandemic and second lockdown. This may indicate that religious revivals—if any—resulting from traumatic events are typically short lived and ephemeral. Similar research, with a similar focus and obtaining fairly consistent results, has also been conducted in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Israel, Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, and Belarus. The only work which reached quite different conclusions was that by Reeskens et al.: they examined the pandemic's effect on a set of opinions and values, including religion, in a representative sample of Dutch individuals. They found that religiosity was the most stable indicator and that it was "deeply ingrained at a young age and relatively stable over the lifespan" (2021:S161). Not surprisingly, the Netherlands is also one of the most secularized countries in the world.

In the proliferation of research on the topic, the broad scale of the pandemic also provided an excellent opportunity to investigate the role of religion in non-Western countries. In their integrative review, Imran, Zhai, and Iqbal (2022) identified 20 articles in which religious coping and general religiousness were associated with lower anxiety during the pandemic. However, only a few of these articles made claims about whether this resulted in an overall increase in religiosity. Interestingly, many of them focused on countries in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Palestine, and Jordan), South Asia (Malaysia and Pakistan), North Africa (Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia), and Central and South Africa (Nigeria and South Africa). With the exception of the latter group, all these countries have a Muslim-majority population, a point that will be further elaborated upon in the conclusions. Similar research highlighting the positive role of religion in coping has also been conducted in the Philippines (Asiones 2023), Turkey (Koçak 2022), Indonesia (Putra et al. 2023), and even China, where a religious revival was seen chiefly within rural Catholic communities (Ruan, Vaughan, and Han 2023; Xiong and Li 2021).

All in all, when viewing rising security as a long-term, gradual process impacting religiosity, the empirical literature shows scattered—and somehow inconsistent—results, suggesting that a clear pattern linking the two phenomena is not observable. Quite differently, contributions focusing on exogenous shocks affecting people's religiosity do find some effects, but they are often intended to be modest and short lived.

Individual Insecurity and the Static Approach

In this section, I examine the impact of personal situations of insecurity (e.g., unemployment, bereavement) on religiosity. Not surprisingly, this section includes many of the previously discussed contributions due to their multilevel approach. Economic insecurities, such as low income, have been shown to be linked to higher levels of religiosity (Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Storm 2017a), and the same applies to insecure job positions or unemployment (Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009). Quite interestingly, in one of the few tests highlighting the fundamental role of socialization processes, people whose parents were unemployed when they were young were shown to be more religious (Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011). In contrast, as for existential insecurities, the death of a partner was recurrently seen to have the greatest effect on personal religiosity (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011; Molteni 2021). This comes as no surprise, as it is probably the most shocking event that can happen in an individual's life and is probably the one most responsible for existential insecurity. The impact of health is less clear and depends on the religious dimensions studied. Molteni (2021) found no effect, while both Höllinger and Muckenhuber (2019) and Immerzeel and van Tubergen (2011) found a link to subjective religiosity but not service attendance, probably because of physical limitations. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, people who had cases of COVID in the family reported higher levels of religious service attendance and prayer (Molteni et al. 2021), but this effect was only observed for those with religious socialization in childhood. This underlined the role of the family and religious background in providing people with religious coping strategies.

As a general comment, most of the contributions discussed (excluding Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011, which only focused on Europe, however) highlight the dominant role of macro-/contextual factors in determining religiosity, compared with the weaker or minimal impact of personal insecurities (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019). To give a sense of the magnitude, the most consistent effect found—losing a partner—resulted in a 0.04 increase (+4%) in the probability of attending religious services monthly and considering religion to be important (Molteni 2021), while the same event was linked to a 0.24 increase (+3%) in religiosity (on a scale from 4 to 12) in Höllinger and Muckenhuber (2019).

Overall, empirical studies focusing on individual insecurity through a static approach find some effects that are, however, very small in terms of size and mostly observed among people who are already religious or who have received some form of religious socialization.

Individual Insecurity and the Longitudinal Approach

This last group of contributions is the smallest one, and there are at least two potential reasons for this. The first resides in the greater interest of sociologists in the macro and long-term relationship between insecurity and religious change rather than individual psychological mechanisms. The second is because this idea of within-individual change somehow goes against the entire body of literature that argues for the stability of religiosity along individuals' life courses.

Indeed, at the time of writing, to my knowledge there are only two studies which investigate whether or not individual religiosity *increases* as a reaction to a negative event. Storm (2017b), using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), found that an increase in household income was linked to a decrease in religiosity. However, the reverse did not occur. Using the same data, together with the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), Molteni (2021) showed that losing a partner was the only event with the potential to cause a slight increase in personal religiosity, affecting changes in church attendance, religious belonging, and importance attached to religion in the UK and Germany. As previously mentioned, only a major event like a partner's death has the—small—potential to impact personal religiosity.

The fact that no contributions can demonstrate—with the only exception of the loss of the partner—a robust effect of negative events on changes in personal religiosity points again to the stability of religiosity along individuals' life and on the relevance of socialization mechanisms. Both points will be deeply discussed in the conclusions.

POTENTIAL WEAKNESSES AND CRITICISMS

This article is intended to review the empirical evidence and methodologies used for studying insecurity theory. When presenting the main empirical evidence, I mentioned that there are some problems that need to be considered in order to have a clearer picture of what insecurity theory can say about secularization processes. The following summary of potential weaknesses that can be highlighted, or criticisms that have been leveled against the theory in the last years, digs deeper into this. In order to draw this picture, reference is made to a previous attempt put forward by Stolz and Tanner (2019), who already wrote about the first three points. I have expanded these points and added another five.

Theoretical Complexity (and Variables' Collinearity)

Norris and Inglehart's central argument is that modernization reduces personal and societal risks, thereby decreasing the need for religion and religious reassurance. However, numerous alternatives or complementary explanations are supported by both empirical research and a broader theoretical outlook, as outlined in table 1. The empirical data demonstrate a strong correlation between measures of religiosity and indicators of risk (e.g., life expectancy, income, human development), but a similar correlation is also seen between religiosity and indicators related to other theoretical perspectives (e.g., education, access to information, urbanization). To summarize, modernization is a complex phenomenon that encompasses various subphenomena and processes that could contribute to the decline of religion. It is difficult, if not impossible, both theoretically and empirically, to determine which factor is the primary cause (Stolz and Tanner 2019).

(Only Apparent) Bidirectionality

Compared with the general secularization approach, which has been also criticized as a useless elevator going only downwards (Stark and Finke 2000) because of its sole focus on religious decline, insecurity theory has the potential to explain a potential reversal of secularization. What if social, economic, political, or environmental crises reversed or brought modernization processes to a halt? Despite its theoretical potential, however, the empirical research has shown that increases in insecurity have not consistently led to long-term increases in religiosity, with only a few short-term and limited exceptions (Bruce and Voas 2016).

Strong Macro-associations but Weak Individual Relations

Another significant issue linked to Norris and Inglehart's insecurity theory is that it is empirically founded on macro-level associations: countries with higher levels of insecurity also have higher levels of religiosity, and vice versa (Norris and Inglehart 2010, 2011). However, several studies have shown this relationship to disappear (Höllinger and Muckenhuber 2019; Molteni 2021; Storm 2017a) or weaken (Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011) when considering individual differences within countries. In other words, "both poor and rich people are on average relatively religious in poor countries, but relatively secular in rich countries" (Stolz and Tanner 2019:8). This points toward the relevance of socialization contexts and mechanisms, a point that will be further explored in the next section.

Overlooking the Longitudinal Dimension in Empirical Analyses

Insecurity theory is a theory of social change. It posits that religiosity changes due to changes in security, and the fact that many associations exist between aggregate figures of security and religiosity does not say anything per se about its role in secularization processes. To further the relevance of the insecurity theory, it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive framework that demonstrates how changes in contextual security lead to changes in religiosity over time, while focusing in particular on the mechanisms through which this occurs, such as its impact on socialization contexts.

Neglecting the Role of Socialization

Both the main theoretical tenet and most of the empirical demonstrations are based on the idea—and somehow assume—that individual religiosity may change because of a changing contextual situation or because of sudden events that undermine individual security. However, this rather common assumption is in clear contrast with the entire body of contributions (see, among the many, Molteni and Biolcati 2022; Myers 1996; Schwadel 2011; Smith and Adamczyk 2020; Voas and Chaves 2016) showing that religious beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes are primarily shaped during socialization, leaving little room for change later in life. Quite interestingly, most studies that examine the impact of contextual factors on individual religiosity refer to figures collected at the time of the interviews, while neglecting to consider that people's religiosity had already been shaped and formed by the socialization they received decades before.

Scope Conditions[5] and Territorial Focus

In its broadest form, insecurity theory purports to explain global patterns of religious decline. However, empirical studies that examine the impact of sudden events (e.g., earthquakes, terrorist attacks, pandemics) and find evidence of modest religious revivals after such events are often taken as confirmation of the theory. This raises two main concerns. First, it is questionable to generalize findings from specific contexts to the global scenario, especially considering that the general secularization debate tends to primarily focus on wealthy, Western countries. Indeed, it is highly recommended to develop a more comprehensive argument that includes non-Western countries in the broader picture of secularization. Secondly, it is crucial to understand what is meant by "religious increase": are already religious people simply intensifying their religiosity, or are there new

[5]The scope conditions are the statements defining the circumstances in which a theory is applicable.

conversions or affiliations? If the former is the case, it cannot be used to explain changing religiosity levels, as religious socialization and its potential failure are the true drivers of change. Therefore, it is imperative for every empirical study on this topic to clearly specify the context, timing, and target population being studied, also given the presence of conflicting results.

Reverse Causation

The insecurity theory posits that religious decline is an *effect* of increased material and economic security. However, the relationship may also be reversed, with the religious context influencing economic outcomes. This idea of a reverse relationship dates back to Weber's masterpiece *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), but has also been explored in many other contributions showing how, e.g., religiosity shapes the welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990) or economic growth (Barro and McCleary 2003). This is a major issue for both the development of the theory and empirical testing, also because many studies are cross-sectional and therefore unable to shed light on the causal direction. Indeed, it is only recently that studies explicitly addressing issues of reverse causality and endogeneity have started to emerge (e.g., van Tubergen, Kosyakova, and Kanas 2023).

Conceptualizing and "Measuring" Insecurity

The insecurity theory is one in which two different fields—sociology and psychology—can fruitfully dialogue and complement each other. Sociologists mainly focus on the explanation of religious change while psychologists study the coping role played by religion. Given their more precise focus, psychologists have developed ad hoc sets of instruments to precisely measure—elements of—insecurity and stress, while sociologists generally refer to the few survey questions showing some relation with the general concept. As a result, what sociologists refer to as "sources" of insecurity are essentially proxies that do not directly capture the key concept. Moreover, these sources may vary across time and space. In the original formulation of the theory, explicit reference was made to existential insecurity alone. Subsequent follow-up studies have expanded its scope to include economic insecurities, which only have the potential to be life-threatening in very specific cases. It is only in conditions in which these measures are actually linked to insecurity that one would expect an effect on religiosity. Hence, clarifying the meaning of "insecurity" and the limitations of the measuring tools used should be a priority for every sociological contribution on the topic.

CONCLUSIONS: INSECURITY, RELIGIOSITY, AND THE SECULAR TRANSITION

In table 2, I have outlined four research questions reflecting the main sociological research on the topic. They refer to:

1. The relationship between-country levels of insecurity and religiosity.
2. The relationship between changes in contextual security and changes in religiosity.
3. The effect of individual exposure to insecurity on religiosity.
4. The relationship between changes in individual security and changes in religiosity.

While the first three points relate to insecurity theory as a broad-scope sociological theory in which insecurity is considered a potential driver of secularization, the fourth (and to a lesser extent the third) deals more with micro-psychological mechanisms.

Even with the limitation of not being able to clearly distinguish the relative contributions of the different modernization subprocesses, at the time of writing, only the *first* piece of evidence can confidently be proposed: on average, countries in the most secure and advanced conditions (in terms of economic performance, health systems, absence of wars, etc.) are less religious. While this is true when viewed cross-sectionally, the evidence of a longitudinal association (*point two*) between the two is limited, scattered, and rather inconclusive, with the only exception of sudden shocks that are intended to excerpt modest and short-lived effects on people's religiosity. With regard to *points three and four*, only a traumatic event (losing one's partner, or more generally the loss of a loved one) has consistently been found to be associated with people's religiosity and changes in it. This is not surprising, as it is the most extreme event people are likely to face, and therefore the one in which it is most appropriate to speak about existential insecurity. This is in contrast, e.g., to a temporary job loss or a drop in income, which may only matter in very specific cases or in very specific contexts.

On a broader level, what consistently emerges from the contributions discussed on the previous pages is that only very unpredictable events (such as the loss of a partner, an unexpected earthquake, or a pandemic) have the potential to influence people's religiosity. However, these related revivals are usually short lived, possibly because they are driven by fluctuations in religiosity among already religious individuals. Interestingly, these empirical tests showing a resurgence of religiosity after a life-threatening event are often used as an argument for a theory whose main goal is to explain processes of religious decline, which is problematic at best.

In contrast, the empirical evidence given by tests specifically designed to show that increasing security has a broad, worldwide, and long-term effect on religious decline is more variable. None of the contributions mentioned so far has been able to isolate the role of increased security in secularization processes. Furthermore, the inconsistencies in the results obtained by the different studies may be attributed to the different countries under analysis. This suggests that the insecurity theory can be of some help in understanding differences between very diverse groups of countries, but is less useful for comparing similar, usually developed ones.

In order to move forward and advance the knowledge in the field, two additional factors should be considered. The first is the central role of *socialization*, in the sense that many studies on the topic suggest that religious values, beliefs, and attitudes are primarily formed during the impressionable years and barely change in response to external events or life stages. This has a significant impact on empirical tests, as studies using surveys that focus on individual and contextual characteristics at the time of the interview often forget that an individual's religiosity has already been shaped many years prior. At the time of writing, very few studies (Immerzeel and van Tubergen 2011; Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009) have explicitly explored the potential role of insecurity during the formative years, and in this light, this article is also a call to action to further this approach.

The second factor is the concept of *religious tools*, meaning that only those who are already religious or have received some form of religious socialization during childhood have the ability to use these "religious resources" to cope with adversity, and this is particularly effective in contexts where religiosity is more widespread. How can these aspects be reconciled with the idea of secularization as a long-term, worldwide process, particularly in light of the secular transition?

The link between insecurity and religiosity requires two conditions: firstly, a high level of insecurity, particularly of the existential kind, and secondly, the effectiveness of religion as a coping strategy, which is stronger when religion is widespread and being religious is a "common choice." In the past, and, in some contexts, even now, religion may have been the preferred strategy, and thus it was important to pass it on to future generations. However, as modernization progresses, people's religiosity is undermined and its role as a preferred coping strategy decreases. There may be a tipping point at which religiosity is not considered important enough to invest in the religious upbringing of children anymore, especially with the widespread availability of secular alternatives. This is when the secular transition can begin and become self-sustaining. This means that modernization should be viewed as a staircase rather than a linear, monotonic phenomenon. Not all changes in modernization matter, as confirmed by the lack of impact when comparing similar countries. Moving from the levels of security experienced in Rwanda to those experienced in Sweden probably plays a role, even an indirect one, but the same does not hold true when comparing France and Belgium. The secular transition can only start after a significant step has been made in human security, but from that point on, the role of security in religiosity can be considered exhausted as other factors intrinsic to the secular transition, including demographic factors, come into play instead. This is why many country-level statistics intended to proxy security are strongly associated with average levels of religiosity. They are able to differentiate between the countries that have passed the "threshold" and the ones that have not, but they say hardly anything about what happened thereafter.

To sum up, if an insecurity effect exists, it will likely manifest during the socialization years. This is because in more secure contexts, people are less compelled to develop a system of beliefs, and their parents are also less likely to invest in their religious upbringing. Life-threatening events occurring thereafter have the potential to cause only minor fluctuations, which are typically observed in individuals who received religious socialization and are already religious.

Because of this reason, understanding the role of the socialization context in religious development should be at the top of the research agenda for scholars interested in the theory in the next years. To accomplish this, not only is ad hoc research investigating the socialization context in a retrospective way needed, but we are also entering a stage in which—with the increasing availability of data—it will become easier and easier to link individual-level survey data with contextual measures that refer to their formative years (i.e., some decades before the survey interviews actually took place).

Despite some limitations stemming from data availability (i.e., HDI data are only available since 1990), the simulation reported in Molteni (2021:143, figure 19) is an example of this potential research strategy. By referring to differences in religiosity between the 1930 and the 1990 cohorts, it illustrates that three groups of countries show a picture that is completely coherent with a worldwide secularization process driven by generational change, in which levels of security during the socialization years can also play a role. They are the wealthiest countries, which are in advanced stages of secularization, the least developed countries in the most developed areas (such as Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia), which have clearly initiated the process but remain in an earlier stage, and the majority of African countries, contexts where insecurity remains high, and the secular transition has not yet begun. The real exception in this picture is almost all Muslim-majority countries, whether in the Maghreb area, the Middle-East, or East Asia. These countries have experienced intermediate levels of modernization, which theoretically could have triggered a secular transition, but this has not been the case. In this specific case, attention should be therefore focused on the socialization contexts not in terms of (in)security, but rather on the reasons why Islamic religiosity is so deeply ingrained in the lives of individuals that it has become an inherent part of their social and cultural identity, rather than just a strategy for coping with adversity. Therefore, the socialization into Islam is still undisputed in these countries, and this makes the insecurity theory not really useful in this specific situation.

This summary has the potential to reconcile the intuition of Norris and Inglehart with the most recent views on secularization. This is because: (1) it gives religious socialization the leading role it deserves, (2) it provides a framework for understanding the conditions under which this theory applies and reconciles potentially conflicting findings, (3) it provides the theoretical tools to explain why religiosity is still high and stable in some countries, i.e., those—such as many African countries–that have not started the secular transition yet, and (4) it explains why it may not be very useful to focus on individual situations of insecurity—and changes therein—unless socialization conditions are taken into account. Clarifying the ways in which insecurity and religiosity are potentially related is also a precondition to expand the understanding of eventual cases that deviate from the general theory, such as Muslim-majority countries.

To conclude, the idea of a relationship between (in)security and religiosity can be useful in two ways. On a macro-level, levels of human security can serve as a rough indicator of the relative position of different countries on the secular transition path, but they are neither the sole engine nor the fuel of this process. On an individual level, it can be argued that religiosity only plays a role in very specific and life-threatening situations, primarily those related to death or serious illness, which usually go under the label of existential insecurity. However, this role is not sufficient to frame within-individual changes in security as the core mechanism behind secularization processes. To gain a deeper understanding, it is necessary to further research the contextual and historical reasons behind the diminishing effectiveness of religious socialization. Only by shedding light on this can answers be provided to the question of *why* religiosity is in decline.

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