

some opposition from a small number of police, razed the mosque themselves (led by Hindu “skinheads,” of all things). All over India communal violence broke out, with more than 2,000 people being killed.

Yet in spite of the seemingly clear religious underpinnings of the conflict, we still need to ask: Was this really a religious conflict? Conflicts between religious groups can have elements of other things—class resentments, ethnic drives for control of land or governments, long memories of

past or imagined injuries—alongside religious intolerance or fear. Religion is a potent marker of “us versus them.” It speaks for the “rightness” of “our” cause. For many people in this world, security comes only from being a member of a powerful group. That group’s fate is our fate—and that includes nationalism as well as ethnicity or religion. Religion provides institutional support because it has professional people to do the organizing. It works well in times of conflict.



14.5 What Is the Future of Religion?

SECULARIZATION VERSUS INCREASED RELIGIOSITY

If you have read this far, you might think we have surely hit all the high points in the sociology of religion. But this is emphatically not the case. I have actually saved for last what has historically been the most important question for sociologists of religion: the question of whether **secularization** or increased religiosity is the future of religion in societies around the world. For most of the twentieth century, social scientists generally argued that with modernization and the development of science, the relevance of religion to the life of society would progressively decline. In this view, the world is becoming demystified. We are abandoning superstition and becoming more and more secular. This has usually been referred to as the **secularization hypothesis** and was an important sociological theory even at the turn of the twentieth century.

More recently, however, many sociologists of religion have begun rethinking the secularization hypothesis. Rodney Stark and his colleagues (Stark and Finke 2000), for example, have presented data and arguments about the persisting strength of religion in highly developed countries like the United States, and claim that there is a deep-seated human need for religious commitment and practice that overrides modernization. As with many terms in the sociological

arsenal, secularization has been used in somewhat different ways by different theorists. At its simplest level, secularization has been taken to mean that people abandon religion as unscientific or irrelevant to modern existence. Books are written about “The Death of God” and the rise of irreligion in modernized societies. But most sociologists have actually meant something more subtle by secularization. As Weber argued, sociologists do not necessarily expect people to abandon all belief in God or in their church or in religious ideas. Instead, their argument focuses on the *authority* religion has over the lives of people: Do people actually limit or suit their behavior according to the dictates of religion? Those who argue for secularization see this authority shrinking in the modern world as life becomes more complex and modern institutions that have little to do with religion claim more and more authority over parts of people’s lives.

For example, in a society dominated by agriculture, religion appears central to everything—from appeasing the weather gods to prayers for fertility or for god’s support in war. In contrast, businesspeople in modern industrial societies do not pray for their production line to work. Even in religious America today people have to work on supposed religious days of rest so that the assembly line is not shut down. Hospitals and doctors, not priests and shamans, are experts on health. Education is delivered by professionalized schools, mostly state rather than religious. Most people have