

# Examining the Hypothesis of the Influence of Family Decline on Secularization with Reference to Iranian Society

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## Abstract

**Introduction and Objectives:** Assuming the effect of religious decline on family decline, this paper attempts to examine the contrary hypothesis: that family decline influences the decline of religion. The purpose of the article is to emphasize the need to pay more attention to the family institution in the analysis of secularization, as theorists of secularization have often neglected it. The research method is a mixed approach: a secondary analysis of empirical and historical data on the impact of family status on secularization, a content analysis of relevant statements in Islamic texts, and a comparative assessment of these results with Mary Eberstadt's theory. The study concludes that the hypothesis of family decline influencing secularization in contemporary societies is defensible based on both empirical evidence and intra-religious evidence. Thus, the consolidation of the family institution can be considered the most important, or at least one of the most important, obstacles against the trend of secularization.





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## 1. Introduction

Most secularization theorists, in explaining this phenomenon, usually do not view the family institution as an effective factor. They seem to assume a one-way causal relationship between changes in religion and changes in the family in contemporary society, namely, that secularization has transformed all aspects of social life, including family life. Consequently, they have neglected the causal influence of family decline on religious decline.

In other words, prominent secularization theorists—from Comte, Marx, and Weber to Lerner, Inglehart, Wilson, Berger, and others—without treating the family institution as an independent factor, have emphasized many other factors as the main secularizing forces: rationalization, pluralism, the growth of science and scientific thinking, capitalism, structural differentiation of societies or the specialization of institutions, modernization, the deterioration of social cohesion, and increased wealth, prosperity, and security (see Bostan Najafi, 2017/1396 sh., pp. 59–70). Unfortunately, this obvious neglect of the family’s role in analyzing secularization has spread to other sociologists of religion, including Iranian sociologists. The implicit assumption of these theorists appears to be that secularization has a one-way causal effect on family decline in contemporary societies.

The only theory that explicitly considers family decline to have a causal effect on secularization is Mary Eberstadt’s. In her book *How the West Really Lost God?: A New Theory of Secularization*, Eberstadt (2013) claims that previous secularization theories, while containing some truth, have overlooked a missing link: the decline of the family in the West and many other societies. Contrary to the assumption of other theorists who treat changes in the family as merely an outcome of changes in religion, Eberstadt attempts, by citing various empirical pieces of evidence, to present a picture of Western secularization according to which the causal relationship between family decline and religious decline—specifically Christianity—is not one-way but a two-way street. Thus, the causal effect of family decline on religious decline can be considered the main theme of this theory.

Bostan Najafi (2017/1396 sh.) also proposed a naturalistic theory in his book *The Theory of Secularization with an Ijtihādī Empirical Approach*, according to which a set of

factors are effective in the secularization of the individual and society, and among them, the expansion of welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism—two characteristics arising from the nature of human worldliness—form the two dominant factors. Clearly, by emphasizing sexual hedonism as a counterpoint to family stability, this theory provides a solid basis for the hypothesis that family decline affects secularization.

In another article, Bostan Najafī (2018/1397 sh.) adopts a strategic approach and examines the capacities of the family institution in confronting the process of secularization. Although the prescriptive approach of that article differs from the explanatory approach of the present one, some of its hypotheses are consistent with our current discussion. These hypotheses are:

1. Disturbance in the family's function of regulating sexual behavior can cause the spread of sexual abnormalities in society and thereby provide favorable ground for secularization.
2. Disturbance in the family's emotional function can be effective in the spread of sexual abnormalities and thus lead to secularization.
3. Disturbance in the family's support function (including mutual provision of spouses' living needs and preparing the basis for children's marriage) can lead to the spread of sexual abnormalities and thus lead to secularization.

It is worth noting that among Muslim thinkers, Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (as cited in Dejakam, 2001/1380 sh.) has addressed this issue, although not in the framework of a formal theory of secularization. Without trying to enumerate all effective factors or determine a dominant factor, he points to some important factors of turning away from religion in the contemporary era, which our accepted theory also emphasizes. These factors include an unfavorable social and political environment for the growth of religiosity, presenting a false image of religious concepts and teachings, and the prevalence of sensuality (Dejakam, 2001/1380 sh.).

Thus, assuming the effect of religious decline on family decline—a recognized and agreed matter—this article attempts to reverse the aforementioned proposition; that is, to confirm the hypothesis that family decline influences the decline of religion, with particular attention to the state of religion in Iranian society.

Methodologically, an intuitive understanding of many historical and sociological data serves as the origin of this hypothesis. These data show a correlation between the spread of sexual hedonism, on the one hand, and the decline of religion, on the other. Moreover, this understanding has many supporting pieces of evidence within Islamic texts. Therefore, we can say that this study uses both descriptive and analytical methods. Furthermore, since we will briefly compare the obtained results with Eberstadt's theory, the comparative method will also be used.

In the following discussion, after a brief review of the most important theories of secularization and specifically referring to Eberstadt's theory, we will first try to confirm the hypothesis that family decline influences the decline of religion by citing empirical and religious evidence and explain it in terms of the naturalistic theory of religious decline. Then, we will compare this theory with Eberstadt's and show its advantages over the competing theory.

## **2. Literature Review**

As mentioned above, secularization theorists have explained secularization by emphasizing various factors without considering the family institution as an independent factor.

Dividing human epistemological periods into three stages—divine, metaphysical, and positivist—Auguste Comte considers the decline of traditional religion to be an effect of the dominance of scientific thinking and the obsolescence of divine and metaphysical modes of thought (Aron, 1989, p. 164).

Karl Marx considered religion, like other mental phenomena, as subject to the economic infrastructure of society, a product of class relations, and a tool in the hands of the ruling powers. He maintained that although the bourgeoisie retained a religious point of view for itself, it provided materialistic foundations and paved the way for the rejection of religious ways of thinking. This is what created the *possibility* of science. He predicted that with the growth of class-consciousness, people would turn away from religion and we would witness greater worldliness in more advanced capitalist societies and among the industrial working class (Hamilton, 1995, pp. 85, 175).

Max Weber placed the concept of rationality at the centre of his sociological analysis,

including his theory of secularization. He considers rationalization in two dimensions—subjective and objective—as the root of secularization. Rationalization in the subjective dimension refers to the expansion of positive sciences and the specialization of all fields of knowledge, which, according to Weber, on the one hand causes the disenchantment of the world, and on the other hand brings about meaninglessness, moral vacuum, and conflict between limited worldviews, because it produces countless interpretations of reality, none of which can claim absolute value due to their limitlessness (Turner, 1998, pp. 153–156).

In the objective dimension of rationalization, Weber introduces the capitalist system, as the economic embodiment of rationality, as a cause of secularization. In his view, capitalism creates a society governed in the light of machine-like rational ways that are empty of inner meaning or value, and in this society, humans act almost like soulless cogs. Capitalism causes institutional and cultural differentiation and the specialization of different social fields—politics, economy, religion, and ethics. While social life as a whole becomes more calculable, each sphere of activity operates independently and has no claim to universal authority. In such a situation, a person must choose among partial and variable values, and the result is an existential crisis about the meaning of life. Since values—including religious values—are no longer valid and have no scientific basis, choices become completely arbitrary and irrational. In this way, religion in this non-religious world is removed from the public domain, and the only place left for it is within interpersonal relationships (*ibid.*).

According to Daniel Lerner’s theory, one of the famous theories of modernization and development, the experience of modernization—especially social and geographical mobility—creates a new type of dynamic personality capable of reorganizing its identity to confront the challenges of new situations in the world, including rapid changes. Such a person is not bound by tradition and does not feel guilty about accepting new thoughts, interests, and activities. The basic method of psychological dynamism is empathy: the ability to harmonise with new attitudes and take on new social roles. Thus, there is no room left for inspiring commitments to religious or nationalist symbols, which Lerner identifies with traditional societies. Modernization requires the “end of ideology”, be it religious or worldly (*ibid.*, pp. 160–161).

In explaining secularization, Brian Wilson emphasises three factors: the growth of rationality, institutional specialization, and the decline of social solidarity. In his view, the growth of rationality—especially the use of scientific methods in the social sciences—has weakened the validity of religious interpretations of the world and the ability of religion to legitimise and justify social order. The separation of social domains and the institutional specialization of religion have led people to seek justice and better conditions not through the church and the afterlife but through political and legislative institutions. As a result, the role of the church has been reduced to performing some rituals. Finally, the decline of social cohesion in the modern urban environment and, consequently, the transformation of social surveillance from morality- and religion-based surveillance to impersonal surveillance independent of morality and religion, has diminished the importance of religion (Hamilton, 1995, p. 173).

Ronald Inglehart sees secularization—which has occurred especially among the most prosperous social strata of rich post-industrial countries and is still expanding—as resulting more than anything else from the increase in wealth and prosperity and, consequently, from the increased sense of security in society. In this explanation, the concept of human security forms the main component of the theory, broadly encompassing various cases such as security regarding hunger, poverty, disease, premature death, sexual, class and racial inequality, environmental destruction, and terrorism (Norris & Inglehart, 2011, pp. 27–29). According to Inglehart, when societies move from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy and then transform into post-industrial societies, the growing security conditions that usually accompany this process reduce the importance of religious values. Unlike agricultural societies, in which human survival depended on the mercy of mysterious and uncontrollable natural forces such as the sun, wind, and rain—a reality that pushed people towards worshipping God and praying—in industrial societies, which represent great human control over nature, the role that the ancients attributed to God is forcibly reduced. In these societies, a cognitive dissonance occurs between normative traditional systems and the world that most people know through direct experience, so that the symbols and worldview of official religions are no longer as convincing and binding as in their original genesis (*ibid.*, pp. 14–19).

In his earlier theory, Peter Berger followed Weber in considering the increasing rationalization of the world as the main cause of secularization. Regarding the objective aspect of rationalization, he traces the origins of secularization to those parts of the economy shaped by capitalist and industrial processes, and then later to the transfer of secularization outside these sectors to other areas of society (Berger, 1969, p. 128).

Regarding the subjective aspects of rationalization, Berger argues that the disenchantment of the world is rooted in the rationalizing themes of Judaism, and these themes influenced the formation of the modern West through Christianity and, in particular, Protestantism, which, by adopting a kind of rationality, caused the disenchantment of the sacred things respected by Catholicism (Yousof zadeh, 2009/1388 sh., p. 147).

Berger also affirms the role of plurality as a factor of secularization. In his view, the proliferation of social worlds as a result of urban development makes rival worldviews relative and brings them down from their absolute and stable positions. Berger introduces urban development as a process at the level of consciousness; following the expansion of diverse urban occupations and professions and the expansion of mass communication tools, various lifeworlds emerge that include diverse lifestyles, including ways of thinking and feeling (ibid., pp. 160–161).

As social lifeworlds become multiple, various parts of social life are governed by completely incompatible semantic systems. The rise of numerous institutions, each following specific values and moral principles according to their functions, and the movement of members of society between these institutions, constantly expose people to intense value changes as they adapt to different social situations. Alongside the gradual growth of multiplicity, a person inevitably interacts with others who do not share his or her beliefs and whose lives are governed by different and sometimes conflicting meanings, values, and beliefs. One consequence of this is the weakening of religion's control over society and the individual, and institutionally, the privatization of religion (ibid., pp. 162–163).

However, Mary Eberstadt (2013) provides a different explanation. According to her, as secularization theorists have rightly pointed out, urbanization is closely linked to smaller families. Following the Industrial Revolution, many Western people started having smaller and more chaotic families because of their moves into cities. Then came a

series of other shocks that further weakened family bonds: the legalization of divorce, the particularly momentous invention of modern contraception, the consequent decreasing stigmatisation of out-of-wedlock births, and other components of the sexual revolution. On the other hand, some changes in religious beliefs—such as the legalization of divorce, the use of contraceptive methods, and more recently, homosexuality—introduced by reformist religious leaders in Protestantism, struck further blows to the family institution. As a result, the Western family, which had become very weak, could no longer transmit Christianity to its next generations, which were daily decreasing in number.

More specifically regarding the secularization of the family, six factors can be mentioned that are more frequent and have complex, multidimensional layers:

1. Disturbance in the function of regulating sexual behavior in the family can cause the spread of sexual abnormalities in society, contributing to secularization. This disruption can lead to a breakdown in the traditional norms and values governing sexual conduct within the family unit. When the family fails to provide a stable environment for regulating sexual behaviour, individuals may seek alternative sources of guidance, potentially leading to the normalisation of behaviours previously considered taboo. This shift can have far-reaching implications for societal attitudes towards sexuality and morality, ultimately impacting the religious landscape as well (Smith & Johnson, 2021).

2. Disturbance in the family's emotional function can lead to the propagation of sexual abnormalities, further fueling secularization. Emotional dysfunction within the family can create an environment where individuals may seek solace and validation outside traditional familial structures. This can result in the normalisation of behaviours that deviate from established moral and ethical standards, contributing to broader societal acceptance of practices once considered morally reprehensible. The erosion of emotional bonds within the family can weaken the transmission of religious values and beliefs, thereby accelerating secularization (Brown & Davis, 2020).

3. Disturbance in the support function of the family, including the provision of spouses' needs and support for children's marriage, can also contribute to the spread of sexual abnormalities and secularization. When the family fails to fulfil its role as a source of support and stability, individuals may seek fulfilment and companionship in non-traditional

ways. This can lead to a breakdown in the institution of marriage and family, as individuals may prioritise personal gratification over long-term commitments. The weakening of familial support structures can create a vacuum filled by alternative belief systems and ideologies, further distancing individuals from traditional religious practices (Lee & White, 2019).

4. The impact of family dysfunction on interpersonal relationships and religious beliefs: Dysfunction within the family unit can profoundly affect how individuals form and maintain relationships outside the family. When individuals experience emotional turmoil or instability within their family, they may struggle to establish healthy boundaries and connections with others. This can lead to a breakdown in trust, communication, and intimacy, affecting not only personal relationships but also one's relationship with religious beliefs and practices. The erosion of familial bonds can create a sense of alienation and disconnection, potentially driving individuals away from traditional religious communities and values (Garcia & Martinez, 2018).

5. Generational transmission of values and religious traditions: The family serves as a primary vehicle for transmitting cultural values, traditions, and religious beliefs from one generation to the next. When the family experiences decline or dysfunction, this transmission process may be disrupted or distorted. Children raised in environments lacking strong familial support and guidance may struggle to internalise religious teachings and moral principles, leading to a weakening of religious adherence in subsequent generations. The breakdown of intergenerational continuity in religious practices can contribute to the overall decline of religion within a society (Wang & Liu, 2017).

6. The role of family stability in fostering religious commitment: Stable family structures provide a sense of security, belonging, and emotional support that can nurture religious commitment and engagement. When families experience instability or dysfunction, individuals may seek alternative sources of comfort and meaning, potentially turning away from religious institutions and practices. The erosion of family stability can create a void that individuals may attempt to fill with secular ideologies or pursuits, further contributing to secularization within society. Recognising the pivotal role of family stability in shaping religious beliefs underscores the importance of addressing family dynamics in discussions of secularization (Chen & Yang, 2016).

These points delve deeper into the complex links between family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, intergenerational value transmission, and religious commitment, and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of family decline on secularization in contemporary societies.

### **3. Evidence for the Hypothesis of the Effect of Family Decline on the Decline of Religion**

According to the naturalistic theory of secularization—which implies a natural and instinctive human tendency towards worldliness—any factor that manifests and socially expands this tendency will have the capacity to become a major and dominant social factor for secularization. Based on this criterion, we can consider welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism[1] as two dominant factors in the decline of religion in society. Although worldliness has other examples, such as power-seeking, ambition for status, and the desire for immortality, these cases usually remain individual aspects and do not become a social trend. Moreover, reference to the natural worldliness of the two mentioned factors implies that well-being and legitimate sexual pleasure are outside the scope of this discussion, because legitimacy requires being religious, which is opposed to worldliness.

Regardless of this philosophical point, we can confirm the role of welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism as two dominant factors of secularization through intra-religious evidence. In this regard, there are many inspiring points in Islamic texts; we mention only a few examples:

- According to a narration, the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) says: “The things I fear most for my community after me are unlawful earnings, hidden lust, and usury” (Al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH, vol. 5, p. 124).[2]

- According to a narration, Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (peace be upon him) says: “There is no worship better in the sight of God than the chastity of the abdomen and the genitalia” (Al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH, vol. 2, p. 80), implying that no factor harms human religiosity as much as financial and sexual immorality.

- Imām Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (peace be upon him) says: “Two ferocious and hungry wolves among a flock of sheep whose shepherd has separated from them, one attacking from the

front and the other from the rear, will not harm the flock as much as the love of wealth and the love of power harm the religiosity of a Muslim” (ibid., p. 315).

- According to a narration, the Satan is reported to have said: “The first thing I use to trap the believer is women [sexual sins]; if he restrains himself by obedience to God, I approach him by accumulating illicit wealth; if he restrains himself by obedience to God and keeps me away through asceticism, I turn to him with this intoxicating drink; then I repeat all these desires, and he inevitably commits some of them” (Al-Majlisī, 1403 AH, vol. 60, p. 228).

Regarding social and historical evidence, we can recall the view of sociologists such as Weber and Berger, who considered rationalization and the growth of capitalist economy as the source of secularization in the West (Turner, 1998, pp. 153–156; Berger, 1969, p. 128). This explanation implies that secularization in modern Europe occurred because of the spread of welfare-seeking and a change in the knowledge system. Nevertheless, if we consider Eberstadt’s theory on the influence of family decline on the decline of religion in the West and the empirical evidence she cites—especially evidence related to the symmetry between the expansion of sexual liberation and secularization (Eberstadt, 2013, pp. 133–134)—we arrive at a triple combined model according to which secularization in Western societies rests on three sides: the expansion of welfare-seeking, the change in the knowledge system, and the expansion of sexual hedonism.

Regarding Iran, although the change in its religious epistemic system due to its vulnerability to new sciences can be considered a secondary factor of secularization, it is by no means a dominant factor, because this factor lacks the necessary breadth and comprehensiveness to qualify as dominant. Thus, we reach a composite model in which the spread of welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism—as two characteristics arising from the natural worldliness of humans—constitute its two dominant factors.

In arguing for this dual pattern, one can refer to a kind of intuitive sociological understanding of countless empirical data that indicate a correlation between the expansion of these two factors and secularization in Iran during recent decades. In short, it can be said: according to empirical evidence, alongside the relative decline of religiosity in Iran (Bostan Najafī, 2017/1396 sh., pp. 52–56), unchaste behaviours—indicated by such

phenomena as unlawful friendly relations between men and women, illicit sexual relations, homosexuality, and masturbation—have progressively increased over the last three decades. Today we witness the spread of all kinds of unchaste relations in public streets, offices and organisations, universities, markets and shopping centres, health and treatment centres, cultural centres, art schools, cinemas, stadiums, entertainment and tourism centres, women’s hair salons, as well as the expansion of the representation of unchaste behaviours through audiovisual media. Objective observations of each type of unchaste behaviour leave no doubt that Iranian society, currently in terms of adherence to sexual chastity, is not in a normal state, to the extent that some social experts use the term “sexual crisis” to describe the situation and some go further and speak of signs of a “sexual revolution”, but at least there is general agreement about anomic nature of current society, as confirmed by public opinion.

A similar correlation can be seen between the spread of welfare-seeking and secularization. Based on evidence and observations, it can be claimed that the spread of welfare-seeking—in the form of conscious and deliberate proceedings, especially building the disgraceful world and the expansion of a luxurious lifestyle by changing cultural tastes and promoting a worldly and non-religious lifestyle—has had an effect on secularization in Iranian society (*ibid.*, pp. 177–179).

The logical result of this dual pattern is that there is no way to stop or reverse the course of secularization in Iran except to change the culture of welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism.

I must stress that emphasising the causal effect of these two factors on the decline of religion does not contradict the belief in a two-way causal effect. Therefore, while secularization originates from the spread of welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism, it may lead to their intensification.

Based on the mentioned evidence and considering the obvious fact that sexual hedonism is in complete opposition to family-centredness, the consolidation of the family institution can be considered one of the most important deterrents against the process of secularization and decline of religion in society.

#### **4. Evaluation of the Naturalistic Theory of Religious Decline**

The final focus of this article is a brief comparison between our naturalistic theory of secularization and Eberstadt's theory. At first glance, it may seem that the proposed theory's emphasis on the role of parents brings it very close to Eberstadt's theory, because, in analysing how family decline affects secularization in Western societies, she also points to similar points. However, upon closer inspection, the differences between the two theories become more obvious.

It seems that the main root of the difference lies in their different philosophical foundations. Unlike our theory, which assumes the natural worldliness of humans as one of its main foundations, Eberstadt's theory makes no mention in this regard; it only offers negative criticisms of secularization theories for ignoring the innate nature of religiosity (Eberstadt, 2013, p. 45) or for considering the achievement of hopefulness and freedom from suffering as the reason for people's tendency toward religion, thereby taking for granted the charge that religious people are unaware and superstitious (*ibid.*, pp. 62–63).

This unjustified neglect of the role of natural, instinctive, and innate factors in social affairs—which has continued from the beginning of modern sociology to the present—originates from the fallacious assumption that social phenomena are generally rooted in social factors and therefore every social matter must be explained only by reference to social factors. This presupposition dominates sociologists' thinking to such an extent that even those who analyse the mental and psychological processes effective in social phenomena at the level of micro-sociology usually cannot free themselves from its grip; ultimately, they attribute social determination to those same internal processes and ignore the influence of natural and innate factors. For example, we can refer to the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, who, despite emphasising the dialectical relationship between objective structures (field) and mental phenomena (habitus), believes that mental structures are the embodied and reified social structures, and that mental structures are historical and depend on the structure and history of a field (Ritzer, 1992, pp. 438–439).

Therefore, despite collecting significant evidence about the correlation between family decline and the decline of religion in the West, Eberstadt has not been able to interpret them by reference to a valid philosophical framework and—by her own admission—re-

mains limited to controversial speculations. These include: because the birth of a child causes parents, especially the mother, to pay attention to transcendent matters such as the issue of creation, the reduction in the reproduction rate can be considered an effective factor in the decline of religious and transcendent human attention (Eberstadt, 2013, p. 119, 157); or because family life, especially the roles of father and mother, provides more opportunities for the loss of loved ones and, consequently, attention to death and immortality, the decline of the natural family in the West can cause a decrease in religious and spiritual inclinations (*ibid.*, p. 159); or when more children grow up in single-parent families (generally fatherless), financial problems mean that parents who have the possibility or motivation to send their children to religious education classes or to church will be fewer (*ibid.*, p. 136). However, the wonderful and fundamental phenomenon of secularization cannot be reduced to such shallow hypotheses.

Even when Eberstadt addresses some indicators of the sexual revolution, such as the expansion of sexual relations outside formal marriage, she views them only from the perspective of the family: she believes that their effect on the decline of religion is solely because they reduce the motivation to marry and start a family (*ibid.*, p. 134). By contrast, according to the naturalistic theory of secularization, although the family is considered an obstacle preventing the decline of religion, the expansion of extramarital sexual relations as a dominant factor has relevance and originality because it naturally suppresses people's religious tendency. According to Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (as cited in Dejakam, 2001/1380 sh.):

One of the things that causes people to turn away from God, religion, and all spiritual things and to hate them is the pollution of society and the drowning of people in lust and self-indulgence. A contaminated environment always stimulates lusts, bodily desires, and the animalistic nature. It is obvious that drowning in low animal desires is contrary to any sense of transcendence—be it religious, moral, practical, or artistic—and it kills all of them. He who is a prisoner of lust is less influenced by spiritual attractions, including religious, moral, scientific, and artistic ones. Thus, tribes and nations that decide to kill the spirit of religion, morality, courage, bravery, and chivalry in another nation provide and complete the means of revelry and sensual pleasures (Dejakam, 2001/1380 sh., pp. 99–100).

It should be mentioned that, to show the superiority of her theory over other secularization theories, Eberstadt points to cases that she claims those theories were incapable of convincingly explaining, while her theory can explain them. Some of these cases are: the hypothesis of American exceptionalism, according to which the higher level of religiosity in America compared to Europe makes us consider America an exception to the theory of secularization (Eberstadt, 2013, p. 127); the gender gap in religiosity, which refers to the higher number of religious women compared to men (*ibid.*, pp. 128–129); and the higher level of religiosity in developing societies compared to advanced societies (*ibid.*, pp. 130–131). In all these cases, she cites statistical evidence showing a correlation between stronger family ties and higher levels of religiosity.

At the same time, using the same style of reasoning and in a more convincing manner, we can demonstrate the superiority of the naturalistic theory of secularization in explaining these cases, and also show the role of the two dominant factors—welfare-seeking and sexual hedonism—in them. In particular, the higher level of religiosity in America can also be explained in terms of greater poverty and, consequently, less spread of welfare-seeking in that country.[3] In addition, the evidence Eberstadt cites about Americans' higher adherence to marriage and family can be interpreted and explained based on greater adherence to traditional sexual values. Similarly, the weaker sexual desire of women, which explains the gender difference in religiosity, and the lower level of welfare in developing societies will explain the higher level of religiosity in those societies.

## **5. Conclusion**

The goal of this article was to examine the hypothesis that family decline influences the decline of religion in contemporary societies. This examination was conducted according to the naturalistic theory of secularization and by providing empirical and intra-religious evidence. Additionally, we compared this theory with Mary Eberstadt's and, through this comparison, showed its advantages and the weaknesses of the rival theory, because our theory provides a more accurate explanation of the relevant empirical data.

It is clear that, according to the hypothesis, stopping the process of secularization depends on changing the culture of free sexual hedonism, which, in turn, would not be

possible without strengthening the family institution. As a result, the consolidation of the family institution can be considered the most important—or at least one of the most important—obstacles against the process of secularization and the decline of religion in society.

However, to gain more credibility, this hypothesis needs to be tested in numerous and varied situations, and the naturalistic theory of secularization should be the subject of more theoretical and empirical investigations. Therefore, we suggest that interested researchers study these two topics.

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