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Secularization and Women's Liberation: An Analysis of Women's Freedoms in the Modern Era

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Introduction

Religion has long had its place in politics, as far back as ancient civilizations. The Ancient Greeks, for example, believed in gods who were involved in all aspects of their lives, including work, justice, battle, and politics (Sullivan, 2023). There was no separation of church and state. Religion influences politics in the United States as well as in many other countries, but the amount of people who do not identify with a religion is on the rise around the world. How does a rise in secularism affect politics?

Secularism as defined in this paper represents not only atheists, people who have a lack of belief in the existence of God, and agnostics, who claim we cannot be certain about the existence of God without proof, but more generally represents the population of people who do not affiliate or identify with any religion, nonreligious people, or religious "nones." Many aspects of politics are affected by a rise in people who identify as nonreligious. Attempts to legislate Christian literalism into legal statutes and judicial decisions include introducing laws opposing abortion, same-sex marriage, stem cell research, the teaching of evolution in schools, as well as advocating against safe sex and birth control measures (Frost 2012, 14). Many

countries, including the United States, have had separation of church and state for centuries, yet the influence of religion has always held a place in politics. Religious beliefs affect people's views on many issues such as abortion and other women's rights, immigration, welfare, and education. It is common for people to defend their political views with religion, or to judge a political candidate on their religion or lack thereof. Thus, how do religion and nonreligion affect politics and policy in modern countries?

The number of people who identify as nonreligious in the United States has increased in recent years. This rise in nonbelief is likely due to the increased politicization of religion by the political right, which has alienated many members of the political left (Frost 2012, 2). In 2021, only sixty-three percent of Americans self-identified as Christian, a drop from seventy-five percent a decade earlier (Smith 2021). In that same year, religiously unaffiliated Americans made up a full twenty-nine percent of the United States (Smith 2021). The United States is ~~just~~ one of many countries who are seeing a rise in the amount of religious "nones" in their population. Multiple variables can be attributed to this rise in secularism, including shifting social norms, and educational and

scientific advances. This rise in nonbelief or religious “nones,” has brought a transitional period into a world with many more secular nations than before which has many political implications. These political implications include shifting voting behaviors and/or party affiliations, and a new influence on public policy in the fields of education, social welfare, LGBTQ+ rights, and abortion. Women have long been subordinated to men throughout history, and only recently in the grand scale of time have been moving towards liberation. This raises an important question. How has the increasing prevalence of secularism in modern countries influenced the legal and political trajectory of women’s rights? Beyond that, how do atheist movements differ from religious movements in terms of inclusion for women? Is there a correlation between a lack of religion in a country and increased political freedoms for women?

Women’s liberation has increased over time around the world, slowly, but steadily. The first women’s rights convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 (UN Women). Outraged about the exclusion of women from speaking at an anti-slavery gathering, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott gathered several hundred people for the inaugural women’s rights convention (UN Women). Another milestone for women was in 1873, when thirty-two thousand people signed a suffrage petition to be presented to New Zealand’s parliament (UN Women). Following this, New Zealand became the first self-governing nation to allow women to vote (UN Women). The year 1911 marked the first International Women’s Day on March eighth (UN Women). More than one million women in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and

Switzerland took part to fight for women’s suffrage and labor rights (UN Women). Moving ahead, in 2010, United Nations Women became the first UN agency to fight exclusively for women’s rights (UN Women). Movements throughout history have fought for women’s liberation, with slow but apparent success. For example, in 1955, zero percent of the highest positions of state in the world were held by women, whereas in 2018, that figure was nine-point-eight percent (UN Women). Women’s liberation has been increasing over the years, while at the same time, secularism is increasing worldwide.

The United States has seen a rise in nonreligious people in recent years and a decline in people who identify as religious. Fewer and fewer Americans are attending church services in the younger generations. About three-in-ten adults in the United States now identify as religiously unaffiliated (Smith 2021). Estimates of the population of Americans who identify as “nones,” nonbelievers, or secular, ranges from fifteen to twenty-three percent (Kramnick and Moore 2018, 155). That fifteen percent would represent forty-five to fifty million nonbelieving Americans, a number that is higher than the combined total of Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Jews, and Muslims in the country (Kramnick and Moore 2018, 155).

This is not a phenomenon that is confined to the United States, however. Nonreligious identifying groups have been on the rise all around the world. This phenomenon is not only in effect in the United States; the politics of other countries are also affected by this new growth. Around the globe, a decline in the number of religious individuals is apparent. According to a Pew Research

Center survey from 2018, out of twenty-seven countries surveyed, more people said the role of religion has decreased than it has increased in their societies (Pew Research 2022). According to National Geographic, the religiously unaffiliated are the second largest religious group in North America; they are the majority in Europe (Bullard 2016). France, the Netherlands, and New Zealand are all on the cusp of becoming majority secular nations, and the United Kingdom and Australia will soon lose their Christian majorities (Bullard 2016). How will this rise in secularism affect the rights of women globally? While the historical alienation of women from religious institutions may suggest that the secularization of nations worldwide will result in greater rights for women, their alienation may be more closely tied to cultural norms, such as patriarchy.

Literature Review

To what extent has secularism influenced the progression of women's liberation—has it spurred advancement, hindered it, or had no discernible impact? There are a variety of schools of thought published on this subject including opinions from atheists, secular individuals, views of the Catholic Church in the form of encyclicals, written by the Pope addressing the people of the Church, as well as women's activists. Sources on the topic of religiosity's effect on women's rights point toward differing opinions on whether a rise in nonreligion has negatively or positively impacted women's rights, or whether it affects their liberation at all in modern countries.

One perspective demonstrates the view that religion is detrimental to women's liberation in most societies where it is prominent. This idea was introduced by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her "Has Christianity Benefited Woman?"

from the *North American Review*, published in 1885. Stanton makes the claim that women are not indebted to Christianity for any amount of progress that they have seen toward their liberation, and that actually, "it has been through the perversion of her religious sentiments that she has been so long held in a condition of slavery" (Stanton and Spalding 1885, 389). She states that all religions to date have held men at a higher standard than women. "All religions thus far have taught the headship and superiority of man, the inferiority and subordination of woman" (Stanton and Spalding 1885, 389). Stanton believes that the strongest adverse influence to women's elevation comes from the church, judging by its biblical expositions, the attitude of its clergy, and the insignificant status that women hold in its organizations (Stanton and Spalding 1885, 397). She suggests that instead, women owe any advancement in society that they have seen to civilization, commerce, science, art, invention, and the dissemination of knowledge (Stanton and Spalding 1885, 390). Stanton supports the school of thought that religion is more of a suppressant of women's rights than a supporter.

The book *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic*, written by Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, provides a similar perspective. These authors argue that nonreligious Americans are less likely to be active participants in politics, arguing that "all laws that seem to endorse the principle that the United States is a religious nation effectively exclude nonbelievers from equal participation in many public ceremonies" (Kramnick and Moore 2018, 129). This would lead one to believe that a rise in secularism would have little

political effect on a nation. They take a step further and say that “unwilling churches don’t have to hire women or gay people as ministers, but that shouldn’t allow secular businesses of any type and many kinds of religious organizations to ignore anti-discrimination laws” (Kramnick and Moore 2018, 153). This illustrates how although some religious institutions are allowed under law in the United States to discriminate against women and other minorities, there are groups that are not technically protected by law who continue to do so, whether they are religious or secular organizations. For example, the majority of mainstream Protestant denominations have moved away from sexism, yet it persists notably within Roman Catholicism, many evangelical churches, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where leadership roles are exclusively held by men (Whitman 2022). This discrepancy is perplexing, given that neither the New Testament nor the scriptures of the Latter-day Saints offer any theological basis for gender-based differentiation (Whitman 2022). This supports the perspective that women are discriminated against on both the secular and religious realms, and that there are some governments, including the United States, which have loopholes to allow religious organizations to do so. Religious institutions are discriminatory towards women, and therefore hinder their rights as religious leaders.

An article entitled, “The Tension Between Women’s Rights and Religious Rights” by Michele Brandt and Jeffrey Kaplan portrays a religious group with adverse implications for women’s rights. The source represents a Muslim perspective in Egypt. The authors state that Egypt represents one of the Arab world’s more secular societies, however,

women in Egypt face many legal restrictions on their rights and freedoms. One example of this is that women cannot work outside of the home unless this is supported by their husband, and according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), seventy-five percent of Egyptians oppose the woman’s right to work outside the home without her husband’s permission (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, 114). Further, Egyptian inheritance laws favor male heirs over female heirs. Other areas of concern in Egypt include education, literacy, and other forms of gender discrimination by the Islamic movement. This publication shows that although Egypt is a more secular Arab nation, it is majority-Muslim, and many Islamist groups present in the region apply pressure against women’s rights groups to impede their liberation and freedom. This reflects the viewpoint that a majority religious nation could potentially negatively affect the rights and freedoms of its female citizens.

Another example of this discrimination from the religious perspective, is specifically from the Catholic Church. One of these sources is a New York Times article by Stack, titled “Pope Francis on Abortion and Other Issues.” This source describes how the current pope, Pope Francis has a much different approach from his predecessors in that his teachings emphasize mercy over moralizing. The Church’s opposition to abortion has not changed under Pope Francis, but he has criticized the Church for being obsessed over women’s issues such as abortion and contraception. Further, the 1968 Encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*” issued by Pope Paul VI, emphasizes the Church’s standing that an unborn fetus is sacred, and abortion is a sin. These sources adequately reflect that

Catholicism in particular, but many other religious sects as well, have strong opinions in terms of rights and freedoms for women, but that in reference to Pope Francis, there may be a bit less focus on this area of Church teachings in the future. Religious organizations, specifically the Catholic Church, may hinder some rights of women, but these restrictions have become laxer over time.

Another school of thought on this topic is that secularism, specifically the atheist movement, does not positively support women's liberation. One source from Guenther, entitled, "Secular sexism: The persistence of gender inequality in the US New Atheist Movement," explains how the new atheist movement in America supports the persistence of existing gender inequalities and rejects feminist claims for participation and/or recognition. The source describes how the United States has a culture of male dominance in that they often make claims about women's rights and criticize women who speak out against men's abuses of power. This contributes to the silencing of women on issues of their own rights. Thus, a rise in secularism, specifically atheism, may negatively affect women's liberation.

The view that secularism does not positively impact women's rights is supported by a blog post from a writer named Jen, entitled "How I Unwittingly Infiltrated the Boy's Club & Why It's Time for a New Wave of Atheism." This source claims that the new atheist movement is anti-feminist and not welcoming to women. She states that atheism is attractive to white, middle-class, heterosexual men because they want to feel like they are going rogue and standing up to an oppressive dogma by propping themselves up against Christianity, and this in turn is harmful to

women. This source is interesting because it also portrays atheism as not only male-dominated, but anti-feminist in nature. This is evidence toward a claim that more nonreligious people may not necessarily mean more freedom for women.

A source that supports the school of thought that religion could positively impact women's rights is by Tahir Abbas. The source is titled, "The Impact of Religio-Cultural Norms and Values on the Education of Young South Asian Women." This source addresses Bangladeshi women's thoughts on their religion, Islam, and their education. One woman said that Islam empowers her to remain strong and perform well in her studies. (Abbas 2003, 421). She says, "I think that my religion has given a positive side to my education, as religion advises you to gain an education, and my parents and I respect this advice and follow it" (Abbas 2003, 422). This case just shows one woman's experience with religion allowing her to pursue and even inspire her in terms of education. This is an example of how religion may be supportive of women's liberation as education is an important part of political motivation.

The last school of thought on the topic is that women's liberation may not be affected by a rise in secularism. One source by Charlotta Magnusson, titled, "The Gender Wage Gap in Highly Prestigious Occupations: A Case Study of Swedish Medical Doctors." In Sweden, despite an increase in the number of women in higher education and highly skilled occupations, a gender pay gap remains present (Magnusson 2016, 40-41). As of 2016, the gender wage gap was between thirteen and fifteen percent, which places Sweden somewhere in the middle in a ranking of wage gaps in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries

(Magnusson 2016, 41). Sweden can be used as an example for the effects of nonreligion on the gender pay gap, and here, we see that the gap is not being closed as secularism is on the rise. There is still an apparent 'glass ceiling' in Sweden although it is a majority secular nation, supporting the contention that a rise in secularism will not impact women's liberation.

Contemporary literature points to the view that a more religious nation will not positively affect women's liberation. However, some sources argue that a rise in secularism may have adverse effects on women's freedoms. A few sources indicate that women's liberation may not be impacted by a rise in secularism, or that religion can be positive for certain aspects of women's rights, however, more in depth research must be done in order to make any conclusions about a correlation between religiosity and women's freedoms.

Reproductive Rights

One question that the rise in secularism presents is whether it will have a positive impact in terms of women's liberation. The particular aspect of reproductive freedom should be explored further. Reproductive rights are a women's issue that has been present for many years and has become more accessible and progressed intermittently in the United States. Reproductive freedoms can serve as a gauge of women's liberation, offering insight into their bodily autonomy and whether they are controlled by the state in matters of family planning and medical reproductive care.

In the United States, abortion began to become accessible in the late 1960s and seventies. A newfound sexual freedom became prominent in the seventies, as young people began to live together

outside of marriage. Their ability to do so depended on the availability of contraception and abortion. In this era, abortion was presented with more openness and was seen as an inevitable part of human sexuality (Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, 2041). As abortion was becoming more accessible and normalized as a right available to women, religion began to play a role in how people viewed the issue and how it affected politics.

Catholicism

What role does religion play in the availability of abortions and other reproductive care? The teachings of the Catholic Church can serve as a perspective for contrasting the viewpoints of religious groups and atheists regarding reproductive rights. The Catholic Church is representative of predominantly religious nations, including Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, where large proportions of the population identify as Catholic (Medina 2021). The Church conveys its perspectives on global issues through encyclicals which are written by the pope addressing the members of the Church. These encyclicals are a representation of the Church's teachings on a topic at the time. The encyclical entitled *Humanae Vitae*, written by Pope Paul VI, addresses the issue of reproductive rights. The encyclical addresses the Church's stance on the regulation of birth and the transmission of human life.

The encyclical states that new questions have arisen in society concerning the role of married couples in collaborating with God in the transmission of life because of new population growth and the growing demands of modern life. The Church first acknowledges the role of humanity in controlling various aspects of life

including the laws that govern the transmission of life. The Church also recognizes the challenges in adhering to its moral regulations on birth control and suggests it may need to be reviewed, considering the practical difficulties that might be present with the current teachings. According to the Church, responsible parenthood necessitates an understanding of one's obligations and respect for the biological process of human reproduction (Paul VI 1968). The Church emphasizes that the marital act must maintain its intrinsic connection to the procreation of human life which was created by God. Specifically, the Church allows married couples to utilize natural cycles such as infertile periods to regulate the spacing of births if they have valid reason for doing so. The Church does condemn, however, the use of artificial means of contraception because it obstructs the natural process established by God (Paul VI 1968). Further, the Church prohibits the direct interruption of the generative process, direct abortion, direct sterilization, and any actions intended to prevent procreation as lawful means of regulating the number of children (Paul VI 1968). The pope even states here that it is never permissible to commit evil for the sake of achieving a perceived good outcome, even under the gravest of circumstances. He is stating here that it is never okay to terminate pregnancy, even if it will save the mother's life. In the years after publication of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, Catholic bishops began to emphasize opposition to abortion as a ground of Catholic identity (Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, 2050).

The main reasoning the Church gives for these standpoints is that married love should be experienced while respecting the laws of conception,

recognizing that humans are not masters of the sources of life, but rather ministers of the Creator's design (Paul VI 1968). This encyclical demonstrates a religious community's particular focus on reproductive rights. The Church sees no circumstance under which it is permissible to terminate a life, or to even tamper with the natural processes of procreation designed by God.

Although this may lead one to believe that religion, specifically Catholicism, will always strongly influence reproductive rights, it is important to note that the current pope places less emphasis on anti-abortion as a central tenet of Catholicism. Pope Francis's teachings have brought a distinctive emphasis on mercy over moralizing that has set him apart from his predecessors. While he has maintained the Catholic Church's longstanding opposition to abortion, Francis has also been vocal in his criticism of the Church's fixation on issues such as abortion. Additionally, the pope has endorsed the Church's stance against contraception. Notably, Pope Francis has not reversed the Church's ban on condom use, a decision that has drawn criticism from many concerned about the spread of AIDS (Stack 2015). These positions reflect the pope's sometimes controversial approach to the Church's teachings and its engagement with the contemporary debate between religious and nonreligious perspectives. This point of view from the Church solidifies that a lack of abortion rights may be correlated directly with religion, specifically Catholicism. While majority Catholic nations may be characterized by a lesser acceptance of reproductive freedom such as abortion in principle, it is important to note that this does not necessarily translate to reduced access in practice.

Reproductive Care in US Politics

Catholics hold a strong view in this area, but how does this actually affect policies and accessibility of reproductive care? According to Greenhouse and Siegel (2011), as Catholics began to show single-issue interest in abortion, strategists for the Republican Party urged Richard Nixon to include attacks on “abortion on demand” in his quest for the White House in 1972 in order to recruit Catholics from their historic alignment with the Democratic Party (2046-7). The Republican Party saw the Catholic fixation on this issue as an opportunity for vote getting.

In September of 1970, after the California Democratic Party included a plank in its platform supporting the decriminalization of abortion, Reverend Michael Collins decided to protest by changing his voter registration from Democratic to Republican and invited the entire parish in Santa Ana, California to follow his lead; the priest arranged for Republican Party registrars to come to the church after mass, where they reregistered over five hundred parishioners (Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, 2053). Fourteen other churches followed suit, reregistering a total of approximately two thousand California residents. California Democrats investigated and declared that the incident was not a spontaneous movement, as it had been represented: it was the start of a political experiment engineered by the Republican State Central Committee to see if the abortion issue could be used to cause a mass abandonment of Catholics from the Democratic Party (Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, 2053). The Democratic candidates said that national Republican leaders were watching the experiment closely and that if it proved successful it would be

used as part of a nationwide campaign to attract Catholic votes (Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, 2053). This case shows how the attack on abortion was reframed by the Republican party to not only express religious convictions about respecting human life, but also social conviction about respecting traditional forms of authority such as patriarchy (Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, 2047). This suggests that a nation with a large number of people identifying as Catholic may influence access to abortion based on their religious beliefs. However, it is important to recognize that these shifts in party identity and manipulation of issues like abortion for political gain do not necessarily show a direct correlation between religious composition of a nation and tangible restrictions on reproductive care.

With a growth in secularism and a nonreligious identifying population, how has this played out in recent votes regarding reproductive rights for women in the United States? There are a number of abortion related ballot measures that have been on the political radar in terms of reproductive rights in the United States in recent years. In 2022, there were six ballot measures addressing abortion, ~~which was~~ the most on record in the span of one year. Of these six ballot measures, three pro-choice measures were approved, and three pro-life measures were rejected by voters (Ballotpedia 2022). Measures were approved in California, Michigan, and Vermont, where they established state constitutional rights to abortion. The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision, which determined that the US Constitution does not grant an abortion right, was followed by votes on these ballot initiatives (Ballotpedia 2022). These bills also marked the first abortion-

related ballot initiatives since 1992 to receive backing from groups that identify as pro-choice and pro-reproductive rights (Ballotpedia 2022).

On the other hand, voters in Kansas, Kentucky, and Montana defeated three of these bills. Voters in Kansas and Kentucky rejected proposals that would have declared that their state constitutions do not include a right to abortion or government funding of abortions. In Montana, voters rejected a measure called the Born-Alive Infant Protection Act (Ballotpedia 2022). The outcomes of all six of these ballot measures would be considered wins for pro-choice, pro-women's reproductive health groups. According to many recent ballot measures' outcomes, with a rise in secularism, comes a rise in reproductive rights for women in the United States. This does not necessarily represent a causation, so other areas of women's rights beg to be explored. In terms of reproductive rights in the United States, although there are prominent religious groups who hold strong opinions against access to abortion care, this does not necessarily contribute to a decrease in access to that care in practice or in recent legislation. A lack of access to reproductive care in some states in the United States is likely due to other factors such as patriarchy.

Wage Gap

A critical aspect of women's liberation is their pay. This is an important measure of women's liberation because it is essential for economic equality, the empowerment of women, and dismantling barriers that suppress women's advancement in certain professional fields. Women have historically been paid less than men for the same work, and this gender gap has not yet closed in many parts of the world.

To use the United States as an example, in 2022, women made eighty-two percent of what men made. The gender pay gap has narrowed quite gradually in this country, as in 1982, women earned just sixty-five percent of what men were making (Kochhar 2023).

Women's Wages in India

India can be used as an example of a country that is majority religious, as the vast majority of Indians identify as Hindu. According to Sengupta and Das (2014), gender discrimination is prominent in the Indian labor market, and that discrimination is even more intense when religious discrimination is brought into the picture (71). The study by Sengupta and Das (2014) demonstrates that female workers are discriminated against more in terms of wage if they are members of religious groups (71). They found that the wage rate for women in both Muslim and Hindu communities was less than that of women for a similar type of work, although the gap was slightly larger for Muslim workers (Sengupta and Das 2014, 74). Hindu women were paid slightly more than Muslim women because of both religious customs and religious discrimination (Sengupta and Das 2014, 74). This study shows that female workers in India, whether they were Hindu or Muslim, were subject to wage discrimination as well as discrimination in terms of participation in the job market, and that this discrimination was more severe if they were from minority religious groups (Sengupta and Das 2014, 75). This case study proves that in some majority religious countries, the gender pay gap may be high, and further, women may be even more subject to wage discrimination due to being from a minority religious group.

Women's Wages in Sweden

On the other hand, in order to draw a conclusion about whether the religiosity of a nation affects women's wages compared to men's, a more secularized nation must be considered. Sweden is an increasingly secular state as almost half of Swedes say that religion is 'not at all important' in their lives. Only about two in ten Swedes say that religion is 'somewhat important' or 'very important' in their lives (Sweden Sverige 2023). Further, only about twenty-three percent of weddings are officiated by the Church of Sweden today, while this figure was eighty percent in 1970 (Sweden Sverige 2023). This proves the rapid increase in secularization in this country. In Sweden, despite an increase in the number of women in higher education and highly skilled occupations, a gender pay gap remains present (Magnusson 2016, 40-41). Recent findings indicated that the gender wage gap was greater in Sweden in higher paid and high-prestige occupations (Magnusson 2016, 41). As of 2016, the gender wage gap was between thirteen and fifteen percent, which places Sweden somewhere in the middle in a ranking of wage gaps in the OECD countries (Magnusson 2016, 41). Using Sweden as a case study for the effects of nonreligion on the gender pay gap, we see that the gap is not being closed as secularism is on the rise. There is still an apparent 'glass ceiling' in Sweden.

Women's Wages in Norway

Norway is another example of a secularized nation that can be used to evaluate this theory. Norway has a large nonreligious population at twenty-five percent (NZ History 2023). Further, the US government estimated that Norway's Christian population has declined four-point-nine percentage points over the last three years (U.S. Department of State

2022). Over the last thirty years, the majority of First World nations followed the example set by the US in 1963, and enacted laws to make wage discrimination illegal (Petersen et al. 1997, 199). This includes both allocative discriminations, involving discrimination in the matching process at the point of hire, in subsequent promotions, or in firings, as well as within-job wage discrimination, when women receive lower wages than men within a given job (Peterson et al. 1997, 199). In Norway in 1978, the Equal Pay Act was passed, similar legislation to the US Equal Pay Act of 1963. This law made within-job wage discrimination illegal (Petersen et al. 1997, 200). As of 1990 in Norway, women earned on average about twenty-one percent less than men across six sectors including blue collar workers, white-collar workers, wholesale and retail trade, business services, banking, and insurance (Peterson et al. 1997, 205). In 1984, women were earning twenty-two percent below the average male wage across those same six sectors (Petersen et al. 1997, 207). In conclusion, in the eighties and nineties in Norway, the gender wage gap was closing, however very slowly. More recently, the gender pay gap in Norway is among the lowest in the OECD (OCED 2012). As of 2012, top female earners in the country make on average seventeen percent less than their male counterparts, suggesting the persistence of the glass ceiling (OECD 2012).

In terms of the gender wage gap, it is difficult to draw a conclusion on whether women's liberation is farther along in secular or more religious nations. In India, a majority religious country, there is a wage gap and there is more discrimination if the woman comes from a minority religious group. In terms of the more secular nations of Sweden and

Norway, there is a wage gap that is closing, but this narrowing is happening very slowly, and that glass ceiling still exists for women.

Property Rights

A third aspect of women's liberation to consider is property rights. Women in many places around the world still struggle for financial freedom and property rights independent of their spouse. This is an important topic when analyzing women's freedoms because financial freedom is essential to personal development outside of the control of a man. Property rights empower women economically, challenge traditional gender roles, and enhance their decision-making abilities within the household. Securing women's access to control over property is a key step in dismantling patriarchal structures. Because of Islamic law, some women's property rights in Muslim countries may be compromised.

Property Rights in Islamic Nations

According to Bishin and Cherif, Islamic law limits a woman's right to inherit property, but it does allow equality for women in their ability to own, manage, and dispose of property (2017, 501). In countries where this occurs, women's property rights are usually violated because the state is reluctant to enforce gender-neutral legislation, or because individual family members are undermining women's property rights (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 503). However, *de jure*, Muslim women have enjoyed autonomous legal identity and property rights regardless of marital status since the seventh century under Islamic law. Further, the law distinguishes between separate property rights and inheritance, women inheriting half as much as men (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 506).

So, women under Islamic law technically enjoy property rights in

general, but it is sometimes usurped by their families or by the state in some circumstances. It is important to question, then, is it religion or societal patriarchy that impedes women's property rights? The authors Bishin and Cherif (2017) argue that while patriarchal institutions have not eroded *de jure* rights in many Muslim societies, the social norms present may be an explanation as to why women may be denied effective property rights (508). They also state that in observing Muslim countries where religion is given a more prominent role, women's property rights should be more equitable, while inheritance rights are more discriminatory (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 508). To support this claim, it is stated that a state with an Islamic religious tradition increases the likelihood of discrimination against women in inheritance law by over thirty points—from thirteen to forty-seven percent—when compared with other developing states (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 511-512). A state that has an Islamic religious tradition could mean that the religious norms are strong either due to the religiosity of the citizens or due to the political institution of religion.

Bishin and Cherif conclude that discrimination in property rights in Muslim countries is better explained by cultural rather than religious reasons. The authors find no evidence that more religious Muslim states are associated with fair land and property rights, or discriminatory inheritance rights based on gender. Contrastingly, the institutionalization of patriarchal norms is associated with limits on property rights for women, specifically inheritance and land rights (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 512). Additionally, effective, and equitable property rights are likely to accompany increases in education for

women and the presence of women's rights groups who can advocate for their liberation, which serve to increase women's agency, awareness, and political representation (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 516). This case study of women's property rights in Muslim countries supports a claim that women's liberation may have more to do with culture and patriarchal norms than an increased presence of religion among citizens or religious institutions in the state. Therefore, one would not expect a rise in secularism to necessarily coincide with more equitable property rights for women in these countries.

Property Rights in Nigeria

Another case study focuses on the issue of property rights for women in Nigeria. As of 2015, Nigeria is fifty percent Muslim and forty-eight percent Christian, and only about two percent of the population belongs to no religious group (US Department of State 2022). There are many forms of human rights violations faced by women in many societies in Africa, specifically property rights, and these violations are the norm because of attitudes of male dominance (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 58). Property rights violations are a common occurrence in many cultures of Nigeria as well as Africa as a whole (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 59). According to authors Ajayi and Olotuah (2005), boys are valued more than girls in Nigeria from birth, hence, girls do not inherit real property (60). Nigerian girls face discrimination when it comes to dividing assets, particularly land and buildings, after the death of their fathers. In the Igbo and many Yoruba communities, girls are often excluded from receiving a share (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 60). In other communities in Nigeria, such as the Hausa land, Islamic law states that girls should

get half of what the boy children receive, but they often end up with nothing (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 60). In the Edo group, the first son inherits everything from the father, but he is expected to give gifts to the other siblings (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 60). Conversely, in Akure, in Yoruba land in western Nigeria, girl children are given a share of real property after the death of their parent if she is the first daughter or the last born (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 60). In terms of property rights for divorced women, no matter what a woman's financial contribution to her home, a divorced woman in Nigeria does not usually leave a marriage with anything besides her own personal belongings (Ajayi and Olotuah 2005, 61). In country like Nigeria, with its overwhelming religious majority, gender-based discrimination persists in property rights. These two case studies have shown a clear correlation between strong religious presence and male dominant societies that restrict women's property rights in some modern countries. Women's rights and liberation is impaired by nations with a substantial religious presence, especially because those nations often are also male dominant societies. The lack of property rights for women in these countries may have to do with religious presence but also oppression by males.

Education

Another aspect of women's rights that can be explored is education rates for women. Is there a correlation between elevated levels of secularism in a country and access to education for women? Education is a key measure of women's rights because increased female education and participation in the labor force elevates the status of women (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 502). Further, education encourages gender

consciousness among women because educated women are more aware of inequalities and they view their gender as a driver of their disadvantage in society (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 503). Women are also more aware of their rights, are in the position to challenge their oppressors, and are better able to hold politicians accountable if they are educated (Bishin and Cherif 2017, 515). According to Jacqueline Frost (2012), European nations that have high rates of atheism, including Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, rank highest in terms of adult literacy rates and educational attainment (17). Is there a gender gap in access to education in any of these countries or in any majority religious nations?

Education in Egypt

In Egypt, a majority Muslim country, illiteracy among women, though decreasing, remains high especially in rural areas. Education levels among Egyptian women continue to fall behind the education levels of men. In these areas, female illiteracy rates can reach ninety percent (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, 115). This is an example of a majority Muslim country whose access to education for women is lower than that of men.

Education Among South Asian Muslim Women

Tahir Abbas looked into the views of South Asian women on education and how their religion impacted their access to education. Abbas (2003) finds that religion is especially important for young, Muslim South Asian women who view their experiences of education based on the religio-cultural domain where they live (413). Studies at the time found that parents of young South Asian Muslim women placed a lot of emphasis on their daughters obtaining an education. However, some of these parents were

concerned with what they perceived as the corrupt influence of a largely secular society. They were of the view that although schools are meant to encourage social mobility in young women, they also are a sphere that could possibly threaten their daughters (Abbas 2003, 413). Similarly, some parents discourage their young daughters from seeking employment after they finish their education because they do not want it to corrupt them in any way (Abbas 2003, 413). One young woman from Bangladesh spoke about her experiences as a Muslim woman. She stated that Islam on its own is one thing, but its fusion with cultural values is the problem. Specifically, she says that “Patriarchy rendered many if not all of the positive virtues that Islam has towards women completely redundant. Culture is the problem, not exactly the religion. Our parents do not really believe in religion, they think about the culture” (Abbas 2003, 420).

Other respondents, however, felt differently about the impact of their religion and culture on education. One young Bangladeshi woman said that Islam empowers her to remain strong and perform well in her studies. She says that the fact that other members of her family do well in education is important to note because it gives her access to a broader range of knowledge and social or cultural connections to draw upon (Abbas 2003, 421). She states:

I think that my religion has given a positive side to my education, as religion advises you to gain an education, and my parents and I respect this advice and follow it. My culture, I feel, has supported me in achieving an education, because most people in my family have had educational achievements (Abbas 2003, 422).

This woman had a unique experience than other South Asian Muslim respondents because she felt that her education was encouraged by her family and their culture. There are differing opinions from different Muslim women because of their diverse family dynamics. On the other hand, in terms of Hindu respondents, the evidence demonstrates that Hindu women tend to perform very well in relation to other South Asians. However, this is usually because of higher social class or higher education levels in their parents, and there is negligible impact on education from the Hindu religion itself (Abbas 2003, 413).

The findings from this source suggest that for some young Muslim women, religion and cultural norms or values, fused with existing patriarchal norms, cause them to be marginalized in the sphere of education. Nonetheless, it appears that the tendency is decreasing over time, with parents or families starting to understand the benefits of their Muslim daughters receiving a robust education (Abbas 2003, 423). Education is important to consider in terms of women's liberation because it increases their political awareness. In majority-Muslim countries, there is debate among families over whether education is necessary, or because of cultural reasons, it is a risk of their child being corrupted by secularism. Overall, one may conclude that although this varies among different families, the explanation for this view may point more toward cultural or patriarchal reasons than religious reasons.

Education in Denmark

To contrast these findings, the gender education gap in secular European countries should be explored. In Denmark for example, they are facing the opposite

problem. According to Christian Wenande (2022), Denmark's gender disparity gap in education has significantly widened recently. According to statistics from Danmarks Statistik, in 2021, fifty-one percent of women aged thirty to thirty-five completed a higher education, which is almost fifteen percentage points higher than that of men from the same age group (Wenande 2022). This gap has widened greatly, as in 2005, this difference was only eight-point-seven percentage points in 2005 (Wenande 2022). In 2005, only nine-point-six percent of women in Denmark aged thirty to thirty-five had diplomas in higher education, and this number has increased to almost twenty-two percent as of 2021. Meanwhile, the percent of men in the same group who had diplomas in higher education increased from nine-point-five percent in 2005 to fifteen-point-nine percent in 2021 (Wenande 2022). Instead of women struggling against cultural, patriarchal, and sometimes religious norms in order to achieve an education, in Denmark, a highly secular nation, women are strides ahead of men in terms of higher education. In the case of education, there is not a clear correlation between being a majority religious nation and lacking education opportunity for women, but in this example of Denmark, secularism may be correlated to a prominence of women in higher education. This exploration of education demonstrates that religious prominence in a country does not necessarily lead to more women's rights, but a rise in secularism may have a positive effect on women receiving higher education.

Voting Rights

Another measure of women's liberation in modern countries is the right to vote. Suffrage is an important measure of women's liberation because it reflects

whether they can participate in politics and decision making that will affect their day to day lives.

Women's Suffrage in Tunisia

One example of a majority Muslim country with relatively progressive women's rights is Tunisia. According to the United States Department of State, Tunisia's population of eleven-point-eight million people is about ninety-nine percent Sunni Muslim. Nonbelievers make up less than one percent of their population. According to Brandt and Kaplan (1995), Tunisia has made a conscious effort to adapt Islamic Law to the complexities of modern life. In this process, it has become, in the eyes of many, a kind of beacon of women's rights in the Middle East (128). One example of how they've done this is through their voting rights for women. The Constitution of Tunisia, which was proclaimed on June 1st of 1959, regarded women as full citizens. Unlike many other Islamic countries, Tunisia has fiercely promoted women's rights since its independence in 1956. Many other Islamic states are not able to be as progressive because of pressure from Islamist groups. Immediately following the independence of Tunisia, they granted women the right to vote (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, 129). Note that there are some majority-Muslim countries who did not gain the right to vote until the 2000s: 2006 in the case of the United Arab Emirates, and 2005 in the case of Kuwait (Schaeffer 2020). In terms of other majority-Muslim countries, Saudi Arabian women did not win the right to vote until 2015. All Syrian women were allowed to vote in 1953, and in Egypt, women gained the right to vote in 1956 (Bleiker 2017). In the case of majority-Islamic countries, there does not seem to be a correlation between the prominence of religion and women's suffrage.

Women's Suffrage in Secularized Nations

However, there may be a correlation between women's suffrage and a lack of religion in a country. New Zealand was the first self-governing country to allow women the right to vote in 1893 (NZ History 2023). The country has no official religion, and almost forty-nine percent of the population does not identify as belonging to a religion (Stats NZ 2019). The second country that allowed all women the right to vote was Norway in 1913, which, as mentioned earlier, also has a large nonreligious population at twenty-five percent (NZ History 2023). Following Norway, in 1915, Denmark granted all women suffrage (NZ History 2023). According to Pia Marsh in the Copenhagen Post, the number of Danes who associate as religious believers drops by about seven percent each year (2015). According to these findings, there may not be a correlation between a predominately religious country and how long women have enjoyed suffrage, but it is apparent that in countries who are less religious or are losing religious affiliation, women have been allowed the right to vote for far longer.

History of Women's Suffrage in the United States

Another country in which the right to vote for women has been allowed for quite some time is the United States. The Nineteenth Amendment allowed women the right to vote in 1920 in the U.S. The United States is an increasingly secular nation, however, religion played a significant role in the suffrage movement in the late 1800s. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a famous suffragette who had opinions on religiosity's effect on women's rights that were controversial for her time. She codified her views in her

book, *The Woman's Bible*. Stanton refers to the Christian Bible when she writes:

I know no other books that so fully teach the subjection and degradation of woman... When our bishops, archbishops and ordained clergymen stand up in their pulpits and read selections from the Pentateuch with reverential voice, they make the women of their congregation believe that there really is some divine authority for their subjection (PBS).

Here, Stanton is insisting that men who are religious leaders justify the oppression of women through their teachings. These strong opinions caused strife within the women's rights movement. Susan B. Anthony, a fellow suffragette, vehemently stated that excluding religious women from their movement was not acceptable (PBS).

Anthony writes:

I have worked forty years to make the [women's suffrage] platform broad enough for atheists and agnostics to stand upon, and now, if need be, I will fight the next forty years to keep it Catholic enough to permit the straightest Orthodox religionist to speak or pray and count her beads upon (PBS).

Anthony is expressing her steadfast commitment to inclusivity within the women's suffrage movement. After this controversy fractured the movement, Evangelicals such as Frances Willard gained more influence in the suffrage movement, and many viewed Stanton's opinions as radical (PBS). Today, however, Stanton's views on religion, specifically Christianity, influence much of the modern discourse on issues of feminism and religion. In the case of the United States, religion has been viewed as an impediment to women's liberation,

specifically the right to vote. The U.S. is another example of a nation who gained women's suffrage relatively early on and is becoming increasingly secularized. This case illustrates that while religion may hinder women's rights, suffrage may still be granted in due time. However, widespread acknowledgement of religion as an impediment may not occur until later.

Gender Inequality in the Atheist Movement

While significant strides toward gender equality have been made around the world, the progress in women's liberation remains uneven in different countries. Within the realm of society and politics, the roles played by religion and secularism are important determinants. This prompts the question: is a rise in secularism correlated with an increase in women's rights around the world?

One argument is that atheism has a limited positive impact on women, and further, that women do not have much of a place in the atheist movement. Since the early 2000s, the New Atheist Movement has struggled to recruit women as members as well as leaders and has struggled to maintain their membership. The movement itself is dominated by middle-aged and older white men that many women find to be hostile and exclusionary (Guenther 2019, 47). This could be because the emphasis on religion and the prioritization of science and reason within the movement lead to the marginalization of women and the suppression of alternative perspectives on knowledge, thought, and politics (Guenther 2019, 50). In American culture, a gendered division exists, associating science and reason with white men, while faith, irrationality, emotionality, and superstition are linked to women and femininity (Guenther 2019, 51). The

percentage of atheists who are women grew from thirteen percent in 1993 to forty-three percent in 2013. However, at atheist conferences and rallies, women make up as little as twenty percent of the audience, and it was reported that there are only thirty percent women participants at regional and national conferences (Guenther 2019, 49). Women's exclusion from this movement reveals that women's place in politics may be decreased with a rise in atheism or nonreligious people.

According to a blog post by a woman engaged in the atheist movement, she initiated an atheist society at Purdue University and found the community to be welcoming, until she began discussing feminism. She argues, "what atheism is offering to so many middle-class, white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men, is the capacity to see themselves as these savvy, smart, daring, controversial rogues who are standing up against an oppressive dogma in order to liberate the deluded sheeple" (Jen 2012). The author makes the claim that there isn't much of a place for women in the atheist movement because the men involved know that no matter how much privilege you have, if you prop yourself up against Christianity, you get to be clever and you get to be a rebel (Jen 2012). This perspective gives men, specifically white, straight men, a clear place within the movement, while inclusion for women is not a priority.

The exclusion of women from the atheist movement points toward the conclusion that an increase in secularism may not lead to increased women's rights. If women do not have a place within the movement, who is to say that women will have a strong place in any decision-making if led by mostly nonreligious or atheist people? Some men in the atheist movement maintain that sexism and

misogyny are systems based in religious belief and will fall away naturally without religion, but this perspective denies the power of patriarchy as a social system. Female respondents argued that this view ignores that misogyny is a cultural system that goes beyond religion and religious thinking (Guenther 2019, 52). Gender inequality may have a prominent place in society beyond the issue of religion or nonreligion because of the prominence of patriarchy.

The gender gap that can be seen in the atheist movement may be less about a lack of commitment or a lack of accessibility, and more about a feeling of unwelcomeness or being silenced. In addition to facing exclusion from the atheist movement, women reported the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment within the movement. There is a type of gender war within the movement, which could partly be caused by harassment taking place at many movement-related events. Interview respondents and female speakers at these events continuously raise concerns about unwanted sexual advances occurring at atheist movement events (Guenther 2019, 53). This aspect of the movement reveals much about its gender culture and proves that the movement can be misogynistic in itself. The atheist movement denies that sexism and misogyny have a place outside of religion and denies that feminist issues fall under the movement's area of concern (Guenther 2019, 54). Sexism within the atheist movement can impede women's liberation in increasingly secular countries by perpetuating stereotypes, limiting women's participation, and creating an unwelcoming environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise in a secular population in these modern countries

may not have impacted women's rights and freedoms as one may have expected. This global secularization has created a more diverse array of belief systems being accepted in terms of reproductive rights, more voting and property rights for women, and more liberation for women socially in general. However, it is difficult to conclude that a more secular nation necessarily coincides with a nation where women have more rights and political freedoms.

The exploration of reproductive rights reveals a complex relationship between religion and acceptance of abortion, which demonstrates that the absence of reproductive freedom in majority Catholic nations does not necessarily translate to reduced access to reproductive care in practice. The rise in secularism in the United States, as evidenced by recent ballot measures, suggests an association with increased reproductive rights for women, although we cannot be certain there is causation.

Turning to the gender wage gap, the analysis across religious and secular nations reflects a challenge with determining whether women's liberation is more advanced in secular societies. While both majority religious countries like India and secular nations like Sweden and Norway struggle with wage disparities between men and women, the factors that cause these gaps may be beyond religious influence, and more about cultural norms or patriarchal structures.

The examination of women's property rights in Muslim countries reinforces the idea that women's liberation may be more closely tied to cultural and patriarchal norms than to the prominence of religion. This study shows that a rise in nonreligion may not necessarily lead to more effective

property rights in these contexts. In Nigeria, a country with a religious majority, gender-based discrimination persists in property rights. These two case studies have shown a clear correlation between strong religious presence and male dominant societies that restrict women's property rights in some modern countries.

In terms of education, the debate of majority-Muslim countries over the importance of education for women reflects cultural and patriarchal influences rather than clear religious correlations. The more secular nation of Denmark challenges the notion of a direct link between religiosity and limited educational opportunities for women, as women in Denmark surpass men in higher education.

The study of voting rights indicates that while there may not be a clear correlation between religious prevalence and the duration of women's suffrage, less religious countries tend to have granted voting rights to women earlier, historically, than more religious countries. When looking into the suffrage movement in the United States, religion may hinder women's rights, but suffrage was still eventually granted.

The examination of the atheist movement in the United States indicates that the rise of secularism may coincide with decreased representation for women. Gender inequality in the atheist movement shows that patriarchy, rather than religiosity or lack of religion is a factor that shapes society and impedes women's liberation.

The complex nature of these topics reflects the intricate relationship between religion, secularism, culture, and patriarchal norms influencing the trajectory of women's rights and liberation across the globe. Correlation

may be present in many countries where these patterns can be observed, however one must be careful not to assume causation. A correlation in the prominence of religion and decreased women's liberation can be better explained by cultural influences in a society such as patriarchy. Future research on this topic could delve into specific determinants of the wage gap, untangle the influences on women's education in diverse societies, inspect the factors affecting the timeline of women's suffrage in different contexts, and investigate the causes of gender inequality in nonreligious organizations and movements. These approaches could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities that influence women's liberations in societies across the globe.

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