

# Religion in Modernity as Global Challenge

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It is the title of the presentation I was invited to give at this Symposium, “Religion in Modernity as Global Challenge,” that is, “Religion als globale Herausforderung,” that I find to be the real challenge. In which way can religion be viewed as a “global challenge”? It should be obvious that “religion” in the abstract can only be a challenge to secularist self-understandings of European modernity, that assumed that “religion,” itself a construct of modern secular reason, was bound to either disappear or become increasingly privatized and therefore, “invisible” with increasing modernization.

Some time ago, in my book *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), I proposed to analytically disentangle the three disparate components of the traditional theory of secularization, namely: a) the theory of the institutional differentiation of the secular spheres, such as state, economy, and science, from religious institutions and norms, b) the theory of privatization of religion as a precondition of modern liberal democratic politics, and c) the theory of the decline of religious beliefs and practices as a concomitant of levels of modernization. Such an analytical distinction should make possible the testing of each of the three sub-theses separately as different empirically falsifiable propositions. Since in Europe the three processes of secular differentiation (let’s refer to it as Secularization I), privatization of religion (let’s refer to it as Secularization II), and decline of church religiosity (let’s refer to it as Secularization III) have been

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historically interconnected, there has been the tendency to view all three processes as intrinsically interrelated components of a single and general teleological process of secularization and modernization, rather than as particular contingent European developments.

It had been known for some time, of course, that in the United States one finds, by contrast, a paradigmatic process of secular differentiation (Secularization I), which is not accompanied either by a process of religious decline (Secularization III) or by the confinement of religion to the private sphere (Secularization II). Processes of modernization and democratization in American society have often been accompanied by religious revivals and the wall of separation between church and state, though much stricter than the one erected in most European societies, does not imply the rigid separation of religion and politics. But until very recently one could account for this anomaly within the rubric of American exceptionalism, without having to put into question the European rule of secularization.

In our contemporary global age, such an ethnocentric attitude is no longer tenable once it becomes increasingly evident that throughout much of the world processes of modernization are accompanied by processes of religious revitalization. The challenge which the recognition of the global vitality of religion presents for us, as Europeans and as social scientists, is a dual one. First of all, we need a better explanation of the secularization of European societies. In the past we've tended to explain the drastic decline of church religiosity in European societies (Secularization III) in terms of processes of modernization, as a general consequence of processes of secular differentiation (Secularization I) and more specifically in terms of levels of modernization. It was assumed, almost taken for granted, that European societies were "secular" because they were "modern" and that the rest of the world would follow suit, namely, that non-European societies would also become increasingly secular as they became increasingly modern.

Today we know that in many parts of the world modernization (in whichever way we want to define it) is accompanied by processes of religious revival and not necessarily by religious decline (Secularization III). This in itself would force us to rethink our explanations of European secularization in terms of modernization. But in fact the still significant variations in levels of religiosity across European societies cannot be explained in terms of levels of modernization. Certainly the pronounced differences in levels of religiosity between East Germany and West Germany, between the Czech Republic and Poland (two similar post-Soviet Slavic Catholic societies), between France and Italy (two similar Latin Catholic societies), or between Holland and Switzerland (two simi-

lar bi-confessional Calvinist-Catholic societies) cannot be explained in terms of levels of modernization.

We need a better, more historically specific, explanation of the internal dynamics of secularization of Western Christian European societies from the High Middle Ages till the present, which is able to account more convincingly for the significant variations within Western Europe, as well as for the very different patterns of secularization one finds in post-colonial Western Christian societies in North America and in Latin America.

Freeing ourselves from the teleological assumptions built into the counterpart theories of modernization as secularization and of secularization as modernization sets the stage for the necessary comparative historical analysis of different patterns of secularization within the Christian and post-Christian West and for a less Euro-centric global comparative analysis.

The second challenge presented by the evidence of religious vitality around the world is the need to rethink our categories so that processes of secularization and processes of religious revival may be viewed as complementary rather than as necessarily mutually exclusive processes. So long as the concept of secularization implies by definition the decline, social marginalization or political irrelevance of religion, then we will be inclined to explain any revitalization of religion or the continuous social and political relevance of religion in modern societies as evidence of anti-modern counter-secularization, indeed, as failed modernity. Our category of “religious fundamentalism” and the tendency to deploy the same category to characterize the most diverse types of religious movements around the world is in my view a clear sign of this fallacious inclination.

I propose that we think of processes of secularization, of religious transformations and revivals, and of processes of sacralization as ongoing mutually constituted global processes, rather than as mutually exclusive developments. Much of the difficulty in analyzing processes of secularization, religious transformation and sacralization in our global age as simultaneous rather than as mutually exclusive processes derives from the tendency to use the dichotomous analytical categories sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, and religious/secular, as if they were synonymous and interchangeable, when in fact they correspond to historically distinctive, somewhat overlapping but not synonymous or equivalent social systems of classification. The sacred tends to be immanent in pre-axial societies, transcendence is not necessarily religious in some axial civilizations, and obviously much contemporary immanent secular reality (the nation, citizenship, the individual, inalienable rights to life and freedom) tends to be sacred in our modern secular age.

## 1 Global Secularizations

In a certain sense all societies in our global age are “secular” societies to the extent to which all of them are embedded within the same global system of secular modernity. There is a global process of secularization encompassing all contemporary societies which can best be characterized as the global expansion of what Taylor has characterized as “the secular immanent frame.” This frame is constituted by the structural interlocking constellation of the modern cosmic, social and moral secular orders.

The cosmic order is configured as a disenchanted, impersonal, vast and unfathomable, yet scientifically discoverable and explainable, as well as technologically manipulable universe, which is nevertheless paradoxically open to all kinds of moral meanings, can evoke in us the numinous experience of a *mysterium tremendum and fascinans* as well as a mystical sense of a profound unity of our inner nature with outer Nature and the entire cosmic universe. Moreover such a scientific cosmological vision is fully compatible even in the most secularized and disenchanted modern Western societies with traditional astrology and New Age spiritualities.

The social order is comprehended as a self-constituted and socially constructed impersonal and instrumentally rational order of mutual benefit of individuals coming together to meet their needs and fulfill their ends. In the process those individual agents establish collectively new specifically modern forms of socialization, the most prominent of which are the market economy, the public sphere and the citizenship “democratic” state, all being characterized in principle by immediate, direct and equal access. Yet as it becomes evident in times of crisis, markets cannot function without some basic sacred “trust,” democratic states cannot function without some basic sacred “bond of solidarity,” and public spheres malfunction without some basic sacred “common good.”

The moral order is built around the image of the “buffered” self, a disengaged and disciplined rational agent equally impervious to external animated sources and in control of its own inner passions and desires, ruled either by utilitarian calculus in the pursuit of individual happiness or by universalistic maxims inspired and empowered to beneficence not only by a rational impartial view of things but by the discovery of human dignity, sympathy and solidarity. All three orders are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence, and thus functioning *etsi Deus non daretur*. It is this phenomenological experience that, according to Taylor, constitutes our age paradigmatically as a

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secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs.

But as the ongoing debates between the European and American paradigms and the discourse of American and European “exceptionalisms” make clear, this process of secularization within the very same immanent frame may entail very different “religious” dynamics (cf. Casanova 2003). Despite its many variations, the general European pattern is one of secularization (i.e., secular differentiation) and “religious” decline (i.e. decline of church religiosity and loss of ecclesiastical power and authority) (cf. Casanova 2007). But the American pattern is one of secularization combined with religious growth and recurrent religious revivals. Thus, the fundamental question for any theory of secularization is how is one to account sociologically for the radical bifurcation in the religious situation today between Western societies on both sides of the North Atlantic, that is, between the radical secularity of European societies, which indeed appear to match perfectly Taylors phenomenological account of *A Secular Age* and the predominant condition of religious belief among the immense majority of the American population?

Taylor’s own more sociological narrative of secularization in terms of three stages of development, which he terms the paleo-Durkheimian stage of the ancient regime, the neo-Durkheimian stage of the age of mobilization, and the supposedly post-Durkheimian contemporary “age of authenticity,” offers a clue for a convincing explanation of American “exceptionalism.” (cf. Taylor 2007, Part IV: Narratives of Secularization, 423-535). First of all, the United States did not have a paleo-Durkheimian stage and therefore did not need to overcome either the established ecclesiastical institutions or the paleo-Durkheimian conditions of belief of the old European ancient regimes in any of its two main forms: in the unitary form of pre-Reformation Medieval Christendom or in its post-Reformation Westphalian arrangement of territorialized confessional absolutist states.

Secondly, the United States were born as a brand new modern secular republic and its very foundation coincides with “the age of mobilization” in the sense that religious mobilization and political mobilization are simultaneous and co-foundational in the Christian secular republic, so that the American Enlightenment and the American civil religion are for all practical purposes devoid of the kind of anti-Christian *animus* which occupies such a central place in Taylor’s genealogical account of exclusive humanism. Indeed, one might ask whether the very term, neo-Durkheimian dispensation, is appropriate in a case like the United States when there is not a previous stage of paleo-Durkheimian dispensation of which it is supposed to be a transformed mutation, that is, when the very

Christianization of the American people is the historical outcome of the religious-political mobilization that accompanies all the Great Awakenings and all the socio-historical transformations of American democracy.

Thirdly, Taylor's "Age of Authenticity," which in his account emerges around 1960 after the exhaustion of "the Age of Mobilization" (1800-1950), in the case of the United States, at least in the religious sphere, has to be dated much earlier. The Age of Authenticity, no doubt, owes much to the Romantic reaction that Taylor has so persistently and distinctly illuminated for us throughout his work and that became democratized throughout the North Atlantic world with the counter-cultural movement and youth rebellions of the 1960s. One could argue that it constitutes possibly the turning point in the radical secularization of modern Western societies, certainly Western European ones. Yet, in the case of the United States, in the sphere of religion the Age of Authenticity may be said to have been already present and operative during the Second Great Awakening, certainly in the Burned Over District of upstate New York and in the myriad of utopian communities and radical spiritual experiments in all directions which Jan Butler (Butler 1990) has appropriately and suggestively characterized as "the spiritual hothouse of Ante-Bellum America."

But, if Taylor's stage theory of "paleo" "neo" and "post" Durkheimian social orders does not fit so neatly the historical experience of the United States, this could actually explain why one does not find in the United States the typically European stadial historical consciousness that views unbelief as the quasi-natural developmental result of a kind of secular coming of age and of adult maturation. Moreover, without the stadial consciousness of the superiority of unbelief perhaps one also lacks what Taylor calls "the ratchet effect" of the antropocentric shift to exclusive humanism (Taylor 2007, 289-295). Indeed, the nova and supernova effects of the age of authenticity have always been operative in the United States even to a larger degree than one finds in Europe, but only to multiply to the nth degree the myriad options of belief rather than those of unbelief.

I concur with Dipesh Chakravarty in the need to "provincialize" Europe and to turn the European theories of American exceptionalism upside down (Chakravarty 2000). Instead of being the norm, the historical process of secularization of European Latin Christendom is the one truly exceptional process, which is unlikely to be reproduced anywhere else in the world with a similar sequential arrangement and with the corresponding stadial consciousness. Moreover, non-Western and non-Christian societies which did not undergo a similar process of historical development and always confronted Western Secular Modernity from its first encounter with European (Christian) colonialism as "the other" are more likely to recognize the European process of secularization for what it truly

was, namely a particular Christian and post-Christian historical process, and not as Europeans like to think a general or universal process of human or societal development.

This does not mean, however, that one needs to accept the now emerging theories of European exceptionalism, promoted by Peter Berger and Grace Davie, according to which secularity is a singular European phenomenon unknown in the rest of the world, other than among Westernized elites, so that the global condition is rather one of “de-secularization of the world” and religious revival (cf. Berger 1999; Berger/Davie/Fokas 2008; Davie 2002). There are plenty of indications of secularity in Japanese or Chinese cultures, for instance, and one could surmise in many other parts of the world, including India. But what non-European secularities lack is precisely the stadial consciousness that accompanies the phenomenological perception of the sequential arrangement of the European stages of secularization.

Without such a stadial consciousness it is unlikely that the immanent frame of the secular modern order will have similar phenomenological effects on the conditions of belief and unbelief in non-Western societies. It is an open empirical question, which kind of “religious” dynamic will accompany secularization, that is, the expansion of the secular immanent frame and of secular differentiation in non-Western cultures.

In fact, the globalization of the category of “religion” and of the binary classification of reality, “religious/secular,” which it entails is one of the most important global trends, itself both a carrier and an effect of globalization. Indeed, it is appropriate to begin a discussion of global religious and secular trends with the recognition of a paradox, namely that scholars of religion are questioning the validity of the category of “religion,” at the very same moment when the discursive reality of religion is more widespread than ever and has become for the first time global (cf. Beyer 2006). I am not claiming that people today everywhere are either more or less religious than they may have been in the past. Here I am bracketing out altogether the question which has dominated most theories of secularization, namely whether religious beliefs and practices are declining or growing as a general modern trend throughout the world. I am only claiming that “religion” as a discursive reality, indeed as an abstract category and as a system of classification of reality, used by modern individuals as well as by modern societies across the world, by religious as well as by secular authorities, has become an undisputable global social fact.

The very fact that the same category of religion is being used globally across cultures and civilizations testifies to the global expansion of the modern secular-

religious system of classification of reality which first emerged in the modern Christian West. This implies the need to reflect more critically upon this particular modern system of classification, without taking it for granted as a general universal system. Moreover, while the religious/secular system of classification of reality may have become globalized, what remains hotly disputed and debated almost everywhere in the world today is how, where, and by whom the proper boundaries between the religious and the secular ought to be drawn. There are in this respect multiple competing secularisms, as there are multiple and diverse forms of religious fundamentalist resistance to those secularisms. For example, American, French, Turkish, Indian and Chinese secularism, to name only some paradigmatic and distinctive modes of drawing the boundaries between the religious and the secular, represent not only very different patterns of separation of the secular state and religion, but very different models of state regulation and management of religion and of religious pluralism in society (cf. Kuru 2009).

## **2 Global religiosities, global religious revivals and global denominationalism**

I certainly will not claim any special powers of futuristic vision. But certainly one can project into our global futures, all respect to historical contingency notwithstanding, some patterns already visible in the global present (cf. Casanova 2005).

One likely effect, staying now within Taylor's analysis, is the further expansion of what he describes as the nova and supernova effects, so that all religions of the world, old and new, pre-axial, axial, and post-axial, become available for individual appropriation anytime and anywhere, thus multiplying the options of conversion, cross pressures and individual search for transcendence. But as long as those paths remain individual and thus private and "invisible," in Thomas Luckman's sense of the term, they will serve to enrich our existing globalized spiritual and religious supermarket, but they are unlikely to shake up our immanent frame or fundamentally challenge exclusive humanism (cf. Luckmann 1967). The modern individual is almost condemned, one could say, to pick and choose from a wide arrangement of meaning systems.

From a Western monotheistic perspective, such a condition of polytheistic and polyformic individual freedom may seem a highly novel or postmodern one. But from a non-Western perspective, particularly that of Asian pantheist religious traditions, the condition looks rather like the old state of affairs. Individual mys-



ticism has always been an important option, at least for elites and religious virtuosi, within the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. What Ronald Inglehart calls the expansion of post-materialist spiritual values can be understood in this respect as the generalization and democratization of options until now only available to elites and religious virtuosi in most religious traditions (cf. Inglehart 1997; Inglehart/Abramson 1999). As the privileged material conditions available to the elites for millennia are generalized to entire populations, so are the spiritual and religious options that were usually reserved for them. I would not characterize such a process, however, as religious decline. But what is certainly new in our global age is the simultaneous presence and availability of all world religions and all cultural systems, from the most “primitive” to the most “modern,” often detached from their temporal and spatial contexts, ready for flexible or fundamentalist individual appropriation.

It is worth pointing out, however, in this context the significantly different patterns of reception of “other” religions one finds in radically secular and religiously homogeneous Europe and in the highly religious and pluralistic United States. In Europe, the only visible collective dynamic is the massive conversion to secularity, either in the form of the movement from Christian affiliation to disaffiliation, that is, the unchurching of the European population, or from belief to unbelief, that is the growth in the surveys of the categories of “no religious” and “atheist.”

Taylor’s description of the nova and supernova effects of the Age of Authenticity seems indeed hardly applicable to contemporary European societies which, I would argue, basically remain extremely homogeneous both, in their forms of religiosity and in their forms of secularity. At least when compared with the already highly religious and extremely pluralistic and dynamic denominational system in the United States. Similar evidence emerges from the radically different patterns of incorporation of non-Western immigrant religions in post-Christian secular Europe and in Christian secular America (Casanova 2006). I would venture to say that there is no religion anywhere in the world that has not taken root at least individually but also most likely communally somewhere in the United States. Non-Western immigrant religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, are taking root and becoming American religions in the same way as Catholicism and Judaism became eventually after much resistance incorporated into Protestant Christian America and into the denominational system, as American religious denominations.

In this respect, to a certain extent the United States may be said to be anticipating developments which are also happening at a global level. Parallel to the general process of secularization which started as a historical process of internal

secularization within Western Christendom, but was later globalized through the European colonial expansion, there is a process of constitution of a global system of “religions” which can best be understood as a process of global religious denominationalism, whereby all the so-called “world religions” are redefined and transformed in contraposition to “the secular” through interrelated reciprocal processes of particularistic differentiation, universalistic claims and mutual recognition.

For the world religions globalization offers to all the opportunity to become for the first time truly world religions, i.e. global, but also the threat of de-territorialization. The opportunities are greatest for those world religions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism which always had a transnational structure. The threat greatest for those embedded in civilizational territories like Islam and Hinduism. But through world-wide migrations they are also becoming global and de-territorialized. Indeed, their diasporas are becoming dynamic centers for their global transformation affecting their civilizational homes.

Until very recently, the civilizational *oikoumenē* of all world religions had very clear territorial limits, set by the very world regimes in which those religions were civilizational and thus territorially embedded and by the geographically circumscribed limitations of the existing means of communication. The Bishop of Rome may have always claimed to speak *urbi et orbi*, to the city and to the world. But in fact this has become a reality first in the 20th century. What constitutes the truly novel aspect of the present global condition is precisely the fact that all world religions can be reconstituted for the first time truly as de-territorialized global imagined communities, detached from the civilizational settings in which they have been traditionally embedded. Paraphrasing Arjun Appadurai’s image of “modernity at large”, one could say that the world religions, through the linking of electronic mass media and mass migration, are being reconstituted as de-territorialized global religions “at large” or as global *ummas* (cf. Appadurai 1996).

For that very reason, Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the impending clash of civilizations is simultaneously illuminating of the present global condition and profoundly misleading (cf. Huntington 1994). It is illuminating in so far as it was one of the first prominent voices calling attention to the increasing relevance of civilizations and civilizational identities in the emerging global order and in global conflicts. But it is also profoundly misleading insofar as it still conceives of civilizations as territorial geopolitical units, akin to superpowers, having some world religion as its cultural core.