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Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization: A Response to Dobbelaere

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The perspective of globalization often treats global social reality as a single global society. The question of secularization must therefore be addressed primarily to that society and not in the first instance to a regional or cultural subunit of it. Following Dobbelaere's three-dimensional model of secularization, it is argued that world society is for the most part secularized in the dimension of "laicization," but not in those of "religious change" or "religious involvement." The three dimensions vary independently just as the corresponding Luhmannian types of social system, interaction, organization, and societal system do. The approach permits the analysis of regional differences without thereby having to put forward one or another of these as normative for the society as a whole. In this light, four forms of religion are analyzed for their likely dominance in global society, namely the collective cultural, the organized, the politicized, and the individualistic. The conclusion is that global society offers the most favorable conditions for the last three, but that overall the future of religion in this society is fundamentally unpredictable for social theory.

The term globalization, much like that of secularization, is subject to a variety of meanings which, while perhaps not contradictory, also do not necessarily imply each other. Without clarity at the beginning as to what we mean by globalization, therefore, the same sort of confusion is likely to result that has so often plagued discussions of secularization: different people use the word in different ways all the while assuming that we all mean the same thing. Moreover, globalization has already become, like secularization, a charged term laden with implicit or explicit commitment as to whether the process is good or bad, whether it should happen or shouldn't. This feature has the tendency to politicize discussions involving either term, a perhaps unavoidable outcome, but one about which it is best to be aware.

GLOBALIZATION AND GLOBAL SOCIETY

I begin, therefore, with statements of what I mean by globalization. First and foremost, I mean that my primary unit of analysis is a single, globally extended

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society. That, of course, assumes or hypothesizes that there is such a society. More important, however, it implies a concept of society that, above all, does not accept the straightforward equation of societal boundaries with state boundaries. From this perspective, we can and at times must speak about, for instance, society in the United States or society in China because states are powerful forces in the contemporary world and it makes a difference whether one is in China or in the United States. Indeed, much of the debate about secularization has centered on matters such as "church/state relations" or "market regulation," for which state boundaries are of course decisive. Nonetheless, to accept without further qualification that the category of society as such coincides self-evidently with that of (nation-)state is to make the mistake of adopting uncritically certain nonscientific, but culturally powerful, self-descriptions as the basis for a key sociological concept. The globalization perspective that I take here therefore accepts state boundaries as *one* of the differences within global society that makes a difference when one asks the question of secularization. Yet it is not the only such important difference: others are the difference among religions, among religious organizations, among regions, and among cultures; none of these necessarily follows state boundaries. Overall, however, the principal question that I ask is whether global society as a whole is secularized or secularizing. Sectional differences are part of that larger question.

The insistence on global society as the primary unit of analysis points to a particular perspective on globalization that allows this unit to appear precisely as a society. For this purpose I rely on the adaptation of various concepts taken from the social theories of Niklas Luhmann (1975, 1982, 1995, 1997). These include above all the notion that a society is bounded by the range of the communicative processes that constitute it, not by the range of political surveillance nor by a sense of commonality or belonging that its participants supposedly share. Other critical notions are those of functional societal systems and, for the purposes of examining the question of secularization, his tripartite typology of social systems: interaction, organization, societal systems. To the latter I add a fourth type, the social movement. In this respect, my view is more or less in accord with that presented by Karel Dobbelaere in his article. Accordingly, I see the structural basis of global society as the global extension of communication based primarily but not exclusively on a set of independent but also interdependent technical, instrumental, or functional societal systems. These institutional systems include, among others, the capitalist economic system, the political system of states, the scientific/technological system, the system for mass information media, systems for academic education and medicalized health, and a religious system of religions. Here cannot be the place for a closer examination of any of these, nor for justifying this view of the structural bases of globalization (see Beyer 1994, 1998). I should, however, point out that these systems are not all that there is to globalization or to global society. A more complete presen-

tation would have to include, at the very least, the complex cultural dimensions of the historical process (see Robertson 1992; Featherstone 1990, 1995), especially the diverse ways in which these systems receive cultural respecification in different regions of the world.

Looking at global society in terms of these societal systems articulates rather directly with standard theories of secularization such as those of David Martin (1979), Bryan Wilson (1966), Peter Berger (1967), Thomas Luckmann (1967), Talcott Parsons (1966), Luhmann (1977), and, of course, Dobbelaere (1981). In particular, the focus on functionally differentiated societal systems as a key moment of globalization parallels the notion that secularization refers to the consequences for religion of the dominance in modern societies of this form of differentiation. The central idea is that, as the *other* societal systems render themselves more independent of religious determination — certainly in their internal operations — religious institutions are at the very least challenged to recontextualize and even restructure themselves in terms of that new situation. As José Casanova (1994) has argued, it is this meaning of the concept of secularization that is and probably always has been of the greatest relevance for analyses of the contemporary social world. The global perspective I am offering here, therefore, has the question of secularization built into it at the very foundation of the analysis. For consideration of the more precise consequences for religion, however, we must, with Dobbelaere, use a multidimensional view of secularization, above all to avoid the simplistic notion that such functional secularization necessarily implies the straightforward decline of institutional religion.

Following Dobbelaere's well-known work on the multidimensionality of the notion (1981; see also Simpson 1988), secularization can refer to three relatively independent dimensions: that of societal systems (laicization), that of religious organizations (religious change), and that of individual religious involvement. The controversies and misunderstandings surrounding secularization most often seem to center on the last dimension, in particular whether or not in modern societies (or, in the present context, in global society) individual people are abandoning religious practice, in part as a reflection of their loss of religious consciousness. Recognizing that the three dimensions can and do vary independently gives one significantly better depth of field in the analysis of religious change in the modern world since it permits us to see different aspects of the question in their specificity, not just as an automatic reflection of the others. Moreover, reference to Luhmann's three types of social systems allows a clearer way of understanding the socio-structural bases of this independent variation. Societal system, organization, and interaction are not just points on a singular macro to micro continuum: they are different ways of constructing social systems. As such, changes in one do not necessarily imply parallel changes in the other two; but neither is such mutual conditioning excluded. As a hypothesis, then, we would test the secularization thesis separately and in conjunction at the

level of societal systems (first dimension), at the level of organizational and social movement systems (second dimension), and at the level of interactions and interaction networks (third dimension) (cf., Luhmann 1982).

GLOBAL SOCIETY AND SECULARIZATION THEORY

If we now ask the question of secularization of global society, one of the main consequences is that we will take the world as a whole as our empirical testing-ground and subunits of it only in the context of that whole. Thus, from a global perspective the notion that "local" factors are sufficient for understanding the religious situation in any region, country, or other geographical division is no longer a justifiable assumption. No longer can we limit ourselves, for instance, to western countries because these have supposedly become "modern" while the rest of the world remains in a "pre-modern" state. The theory of secularization will stand, fall, or transform in a field of vision that includes not only Europe, Australasia, and North America, but also all of Asia, South America, and Africa. In addition, how a religious institution appears in any given region has to be tested and understood also in terms of non-regional, that is global, influences.

To take one obvious example, the Roman Catholic church is quite clearly a global religious organization that cannot be identified with any of its regional manifestations; nor is it simply the sum of these (see Casanova 1997). The global character finds its reflection in organizational policies ranging from the nature of its ritual offerings to the way it relates to governments and responds to changes in local religious involvement. Accordingly, Roman Catholicism itself is a relatively consistent independent variable when it comes to understanding religious involvement; just as there is a consistency in the way this organization, as an institutional manifestation of the global religious system, relates to political, economic, health, educational, media, and other societal systems. Such observations do not negate the importance of a whole host of more local factors such as cultural particularities and relative minority/majority status. They point out, however, that not only can we not have a proper understanding of secularization and Roman Catholicism without at least the addition of a global perspective, but that implicitly the secularization debate has been forced to do this all along (see, e.g., Chaves and Cann 1992; Verweij *et al.* 1997).

Similarly, the religion of immigrant groups may look locally like cultural adaptation; but very often such religious expression is also tied into transnational and global movements, leading to developments in terms of *both* points of reference. To take one or two examples: recent Muslim migrants to Europe and North America have been forming different sorts of religious institutions, often congregational and multifunctional, in their new locations. These forms can be understood to a large extent in local terms. Yet at least in part, the proliferation of these organizational and involvement manifestations owes its

strength and other of its features to global characteristics of contemporary Islam. These include the availability of a range of social resources: everything from money and books to "anti-secular" (that is, de-differentiating) theologies and the global cultural example of Islamic strength or resurgence. Even among non-migrants, such as African-American Muslims, these same factors undoubtedly affect the form — for example, greater "orthodoxy" — and the strength of local religious movements (cf., Haddad and Smith 1994). Again, therefore, such factors affect all three dimensions of what secularization theory looks at.

A third example concerns Pentecostalism. Like Roman Catholicism and Islam, this is a global movement with at least as striking local variations. It seems to be strong and growing in a great many regions of the world, in some more than others (cf., Cox 1995). Trying to understand Pentecostal organizational and involvement growth in terms of only one region or country at a time is quite clearly inadequate in light of the global character of the phenomenon (see Poewe 1994). Thus, to take but one instance, Pentecostalism is growing in almost all regions of Canada, but this seems to be paltry when compared to what is happening in Latin America. Therefore, differences between the region that coincides with the Canadian state and that which we call Latin America do have an impact. Yet how does one understand the fact that Pentecostalism is such a significantly growing religious movement in so many regions of the world at the same time? To what elements does that global growth correspond? As with Roman Catholicism, both local and global factors are evidently involved. To attempt an understanding of this movement with relation to the questions of secularization solely on an isolated country-by-country basis is not only to underestimate sub-national local variation but, more important, to miss the dynamic features of Pentecostalism that make it a growing worldwide religious phenomenon: it seems to respond to critical features of global society, as well as those of local regions or countries. Or, to put the matter in another way, this time using the language of current rational choice approaches to religion, a global perspective asks us to look at the religious market as global, as well as local or national. And to repeat, part of my main point is that the debate about secularization has been doing this implicitly for quite some time simply because the data make it almost unavoidable.

Looking at the question of secularization from a global perspective, and in light of the concrete examples that I have just given, one is led to at least one rather obvious conclusion. If we include Iran, Korea, and India in our view along with the United States and Sweden, it seems evident that the notion of secularization as a straightforward loss for religion of all societal influence or significance does not apply to global society as a whole. Indeed, few observers anywhere are willing to defend the hypothesis that, globally speaking, we live today in a secularized society in that sense. The distinction among dimensions of secularization should, however, induce caution in letting the matter rest there. It may be that globally, at the level of individual involvement and orientations,

religion is as strong or weak as it has ever been. Yet that idea does not address the question of the social forms of religion and the broader societal influence and significance of those social forms. For these social forms are what, sociologically speaking, religion is. It is these that the sociological theory of secularization addresses primarily. Individual religious consciousness must, sociologically speaking, remain strictly derivative. Put somewhat differently, if the religious institutions that bring about the convergence of religious communication (and, only thereby, consciousness) in specific social forms of religion are relatively weak in one society as opposed to another (and I remind the reader that in the present context *society* is quite expressly *not* a synonym for *country*), then it is meaningful to speak about the secularization of the former in comparison with the latter. Attention to the different dimensions of secularization with respect to global society can serve to clarify this statement.

As I indicated above, the societal dimension of secularization refers to the effects on religious forms and influence of a dominance of functionally differentiated societal systems. What secularizes at this level are the *other* societal systems, meaning that religious communication directly determines at best *only one* such system among others. The secularization thesis would then hypothesize the decline of overall societal influence of religion as a result of this circumstance, not its disappearance or even necessarily overall decline in *all* dimensions. In a context of *competition*, not among religions, but among different technically and instrumentally oriented societal systems, the one for religion will have difficulty being among the more determinative.¹ Thus, for example, a region of global society which is “underdeveloped” in terms of political power, economic wealth, educational attainment, technological sophistication, mass media presence, or health institutions is one that, from the perspective of social power, most observers would consider disadvantaged and marginalized. In that light, the secularization thesis would ask: How many of these observers would put into this category a region where religious institutions are weak or declining? If the answer to this question, based on empirical observation, is that few would, then the secularization thesis would be pointing to an important sociological aspect of that society. I should note that this scenario quite expressly includes the possibility that quite a few observers would consider the “religiously weak” regions *religiously and morally* insufficient and perhaps even doomed in the future because of their religio-moral weakness; but that is another way of making the same point: it is *only* by religious and religiously dependent criteria that such regions are weak. Such considerations, however, point to only part of the picture.

A further important point is that any secularization thesis, whether applied

¹ This argument is, of course, equivalent to transposing the question of secularization to that of *privatization*. I avoid that formulation here because the term privatization is subject to at least as much varied meaning as secularization, and therefore its use would require me to devote considerable space to a preliminary discussion of this term as well. Elsewhere, I have done the reverse. I avoided the term secularization to talk only about privatization (see Beyer 1994: chapter 3).

locally or globally, will have very little cogency if we adopt a too functional conception of religion. If, for instance, whatever makes for societal integration, community solidarity, worldview, or speculation about "ultimate reality" is to be counted as religion, then it is located so closely to the very existence of social groups and the act of reflection on the human condition that religion will be influential in any society by definition. For secularization to have real meaning, therefore, we have to adopt a more substantive idea of religion, one that includes both the necessary presence in religious activity of postulated supraempirical, supernatural or divine agency, and above all the supposition by human religious actors that such agencies (whether personal or not) can and do communicate or are more generally accessible as sources of information. Such a substantive conception would also have to include authoritative institutions that carry, control, and are primarily charged with such communication.

In sum then, secularization at the level of global society must address the question of religious influence and importance with multiple dimensions in mind, with a substantive or institutional conception of what will count as religion, and therefore with a focus on the fate of the social forms of religion in this society. Only with these assumptions can we coordinate what it is that we are talking about. What arises from such a perspective, however, is not a straightforward picture of either the confirmation or the falsification of a thesis of religious decline; nor, for that matter, one of religious resurgence. Instead, I would suggest, what we get is a fairly complex and *unpredictable* picture. As Karel Dobbelaere states in his article, secularization, from a multidimensional and institutional perspective, becomes a descriptive and not a predictive hypothesis. Even if we were to agree that, thus far, the dominance of a functionally differentiated system at the global societal level has led to the decline in the broader social influence of religious institutions relative to other functionally oriented institutions, that does not mean that we can say with any assurance that this situation will continue as long as the structure of global society is as it is. That, of course, is already a significant retreat from a strong version of secularization, which insists that modernization means the inevitable decline and even disappearance of religion, in whatever form.

RELIGION IN GLOBAL SOCIETY

Turning now to the question of the social forms of religion in global society, we can perhaps divide the possibilities into four general heuristic types or alternatives for creating and maintaining religious convergence or authority that can be broadly powerful and influential in the day-to-day workings of global society. First, historically one of the most common is what I wish to call the "collective cultural" type, in which religion is not clearly differentiated from other aspects of culture and is simply the religious dimension of collective cultural life. Examples are the religions of small scale societies, most popular

religion, and religious expressions that maintain their patterns and convergence by local custom and tradition. This is a very interaction-based form of religion. Second, we have organized religion (including religious movements), a form that differentiates religious activity in terms of distinctions between members and nonmembers and the rules that define the difference. Monastic religion, religious orders, sects, denominations, and today many cultic and pilgrimage centers would fall in this category. The third model is that of politicized religion, which includes state enforced religious monopolies such as the classic "church," and instances in which religious prescriptions are made collectively binding through incorporation in political and legal structures. Finally, the limiting case of minimal or no convergence is individualized or small social-network religion, exemplified for instance in Luckmann's notion of "invisible religion" or *bricolage* (Luckmann 1967), and Stark and Bainbridge's idea of audience or client cult (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

In global society as a whole, all four of these types have their place and importance. In light of the density of global communication, however, the collective cultural type is probably disfavored simply because it relies heavily on the lack of both religious and secular alternatives to maintain convergence. It is, of course, still widely present, not just in comparatively isolated regions, but also in the world's large urban areas. Here as well, local traditions have a way of perpetuating themselves. People do not change their religious habits all that easily. Cultural traditions, including religious ones, maintain themselves through families and other interaction-based social networks without the assistance of overarching systems, organizations, or social movements. Indeed, the increasing availability of religious alternatives can just as easily lead to the reassertion of one's traditional religious identity. Getting to know "the other" does not necessarily mean becoming more like that other; it can also lead to the clearer understanding of the difference of oneself (see Beyer 1997). Nonetheless, left to itself, this sort of religious continuity will probably eventually lead to greater and greater divergence unless institutions of religious authority can find ways of asserting or maintaining the convergence. That implies organizational (including social movements) and/or politico-legal strategies. For the purposes of the secularization thesis, this type would therefore appear under the analysis of one or more of the other three.

The other three types would seem, by contrast, to be greatly favored in a global society dominated by technical societal systems and by undeniable cultural and religious pluralism. Individualized religiosity is a clear possibility in the majority of the world's regions, but I leave this aside because this form cannot, almost by definition, generate the kind of religious convergence that would seem to be a condition for the possibility of the broad social influence of the religious modality. Put somewhat differently, and following Luckmann (1967), a dominance of "invisible" religion is tantamount to secularization in a quite strong sense because there would be insufficient concentration of commun-

icative resources to mount a serious effort at broad societal influence of religious tendencies as religion.

As for politicized religion, I have argued elsewhere (1994) that this is probably the prime way for religious institutions and authorities to gain the sort of influence that would negate any version of the secularization thesis. Nonetheless, a key part of that argument is that the possibilities in this direction have thus far been restricted, above all by the limitations of the most important structure of the global political system, the nation-state. States are geographically limited in their surveillance capacities, and in the context of the global state system, extending religious prescriptions beyond borders is problematic except insofar as state authorities avail themselves of the same techniques as are available to any nongovernmental movement or organization. Indeed, with the exception of a number of Islamic countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, politicizing religion in order to generate a religious monopoly is in global terms comparatively rare or at least difficult to maintain. We thus arrive at organized religion as the one form with the most possibilities and perhaps even the most interest as far as the secularization thesis is concerned.

Organized religion has the distinct advantage of not having to rely directly on other societal systems nor on circumstances that are difficult to maintain in a richly connected global society. Unlike the politicized option, it does not have to depend on control of the political and legal systems, nor on their express support for religious authority. Unlike the collective cultural type, it does not rely on a relatively homogeneous religious environment. In fact, the organization is a type of social system that can, through its membership rules and internal structures, ignore other social boundaries, even those defined by geography and powerful systems such as states and the global economy. Social movements have similar advantages. Organizations allow, from a global society perspective, relatively arbitrary communicative convergence simply because the members agree on the rules that define it. And in modern global circumstances, most organizations are not totalistic, allowing their members to lead much or most of their lives outside the organizational structures. This feature is part of the flexibility of the organization that makes it such a widespread type of social system under modern and global circumstances. From the Roman Catholic church to Soka Gakkai, from Agudat Israel to worldwide Buddhist orders, organization is one, and possibly even the prime, systemic face of religion in today's world.

The advantages of organizations and social movements have a reverse face, however. Unlike societal systems such as economy, state, or science, organizations and movements can be endlessly multiplied; they foster pluralism in religion, indeed they are largely the way that we give form and face to religious pluralism. While that is a strength from some perspectives — notably in current rational choice theories of religion — in other respects it points precisely to what the secularization thesis is talking about, at least in its societal dimension.

If we reduce the secularization thesis to the simplistic prediction that religion will disappear in modern and global society, then the continued strength and vitality, at the least, of organized religion belies it rather straightforwardly. If, on the other hand, we look at religion as a societal system in comparison and to some degree in competition with other societal systems, notably politics, law, economy, science, mass media, education, and medicine, then the picture is quite different. Without overarching structures beyond movements and organizations, structures that bring about a broader convergence of communication such as happens in these latter systems, religion is at a distinct disadvantage. It is in this sense that pluralism points to secularization; for there are currently no such overarching structures for religion. There are just religions and their myriad independent subdivisions in whatever form. At bottom, for religion there is no "discipline of the market," a lack for which we find ironic evidence in the inability thus far for proponents of rational choice approaches to religion to find any satisfactory measure of "competitiveness" other than "success" in terms of strictly organizational or social movements measures. Religion has, for instance, no global bodies of note, other than those for individual religions; it has no broadly accepted standards of attainment such as generating the latest scientific or medical advance, scoring high or low on educational attainment tests, or even, as in the world of sport, world championships. It has no equivalent of interchangeable currencies or capital markets, and only very rudimentary parallels to political diplomacy. These and others like them are, of course, technical measures and procedures, and one might argue that such things shouldn't apply to religion. That, however, is simply a reflection of the fact that the society is dominated by technically oriented systems.

Looked at from a somewhat different angle, the prevalence of organizational and politicized religion as forms for producing convergent religious authority means that the strength of religion in global society is unlikely to yield any discernible pattern over the medium to long term. Only two possibilities are easy to exclude: the outright disappearance of either religion as such or authoritative religions, and the emergence of a victorious world religion that effectively absorbs or supersedes all the others. Within those broad extremes exists a great variety of possibilities. If we accept that politicization is both difficult and effectively limited to individual states, if we accept further that the reliance on organizational and social movement forms can lead to very diverse regional results ranging from little authoritative religion and *bricolage* to multiple strong religious organizations and even regional monopolies, then the global picture from the perspective of secularization theory will continue to be extremely varied with no discernible global pattern. Religion, in other words, is *optional* at the level of global society. It can be locally strong or weak, by whatever institutional measure, with no necessary consequences in other functional systems. If educational attainment, economic performance, saturation of mass media, strength of legal system and government can be correlated with health

(for example infant mortality, average life expectancy), or any other combination of these, the same cannot be said for religion. People can go to church in droves in the United States or stay away in droves in Europe. Iran can set up a theocratic state and China can claim an atheistic one. As far as religion is concerned, at the level of global society, there are quite a number of likely regional outcomes; therefore it makes little sense to see one region or another as the *exception* because, on the basis of current evidence, both contemporary and historical, there does not seem to be a clear trend. Following this suggestion, the whole question of exceptionalism would in effect become moot, and it would become so on the basis of secularization theory. This brings me, in a concluding argument, to the matter of the explanatory status of secularization theory — and, for that matter, of its supposed rivals.

THE USE OF SECULARIZATION THEORY

As I have argued, versions of secularization theory which have predicted that modern societal conditions mean the necessary decline of religion in all dimensions have been proved wrong. Such strong versions were in any case rarely the rule among sociologists of religion. If Berger (1967), Luckmann (1967), and Wallace (1966) could be accused of that in the 1960s and 1970s, others such as Parsons (1966), Luhmann (1977), and Martin (1979) could not. The aspect of the secularization thesis that is, I suggest, still valuable is the portion of the analysis which looks at the consequences for religion of a dominance of functional differentiation (see Casanova 1994). The institutional or societal dimension of secularization continues to be a way of gaining insight into what is happening to religion not only under modern, but also under global conditions. Yet even here, we must bear in mind that secularization is a very high level, macrotheoretical construct. As such, its value is not and never has been in *predicting outcomes*, but rather in offering a useful *description of the societal situation* in which we find ourselves with respect to religion. Put in another way, the secularization thesis explains why and how religion as an arena of human endeavor faces peculiar challenges in contemporary global society; it cannot, however, predict how the observable responses in the religious domain will fare, simply because at that macrosocial level there are far too many variables at play. One of the advantages of moving the question of secularization to the global level is that this limitation of the theory becomes that much more obvious. It is from this perspective that I must by and large agree with Karel Dobbelare's assessment: secularization is useful as a descriptive term, much like the idea of globalization and its various attendant theories. Its "truth" or "falsity" is therefore in the cogency of its descriptions and in the kind of questions it allows us to ask, not in its predictive capacity. In this respect, probably its main strength is that it encourages us to ask the question of social form and social influence of religion and religions, and not just that of quantitative presence or

absence. It sharpens our awareness of distinctions between religiousness and religion, between religious orientation or religious action and religious authority. As such, it is well worth maintaining in the sociological arsenal as a way of seeing the contemporary, modern, and global situations — as long as we understand that neither it nor any other theoretical approach deserves to monopolize our sociological vision.

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