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The Case Against Secularization: A Rebuttal*

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Abstract

This article examines the main charges against secularization theory and finds them wanting. Contrary to the recent arguments of various critics, there is a reasonably solid body of secularization theory with valid historical content; secularization cannot be explained away as either institutionalization or transformation; it is neither a self-limiting process nor reversed by fundamentalist movements; and while secularization theory may be of limited use in current macrosociological research on global change, it is as yet far from irrelevant. Until it is more solidly refuted, secularization theory remains a valuable part of the theoretical arsenal of the sociology of religion.

Secularization used to be part of the conventional sociological wisdom. In fact, for most Western intellectuals the Great Transformation since at least the eighteenth century was above all a process of secularization. According to the collective understanding of these intellectuals, modern societies no longer operated under a sacred canopy; the canopy had dissolved into a set of leaky umbrellas. In *gesellschaft*, individuals were left to their own spiritual devices, which were to become increasingly disconnected from traditional religion. Once exposed to rational criticism, the tenets of a faith could no longer be accepted on faith or serve to unify a culture. Religious institutions weakened and were reduced to a minor role. Above all, social life in modernity no longer derived its meaning from being embedded in a transcendentally guaranteed order. Secularization, in short, was always more than a particular set of hypotheses about particular institutions: it was central to the self-interpretation of modern societies. The sociology of religion only elaborated in more systematic terms what was a common perspective shared by the majority of intellectuals.

Recently, however, the conventional wisdom has come under attack, and secularization theory in particular has become suspect in the eyes of sociologists. The charges against it range from complaints about the lack of theory to

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criticisms of misinterpretations of the historical record to challenging descriptions of contemporary religious developments. Several of these charges have been made in this journal (Hadden 1987; Crippen 1988). Together, they are beginning to form a new conventional wisdom: religion is not a spent force, the critics would argue; in fact, secularization is necessarily a self-limiting process overrated in its historical significance; in many ways, people today are more "religious" than they were in the past; in any case, religious revivals are bound to occur; religious beliefs and symbolism do not disappear but simply change in form.

In this article I critically examine the case against secularization. My analysis takes the form of a rebuttal, a brief for the defense. I argue that the charges against secularization theory are not as forceful as they seem, so that any conviction would be premature. Of course, to say that the case is weak is not to say that the defendant is innocent or perfect. But this I do not have to show: the burden of proof is still on the prosecution. My purpose in presenting the case for the defense is threefold: to help preserve some central insights contained in secularization theory that are part and parcel of the sociological tradition, to restore this body of theory to its rightful place among valuable contributions to comparative-historical sociology, and to clear the way for further work that would solve remaining problems.

To facilitate evaluation of my argument, let me first state the main claims of the theory as concisely as possible, relying on the work of its most prominent proponents (Dobbelaere 1981, 1985, 1987; Luhmann 1977; Martin 1978; Wilson 1982). Secularization theory is a *general* theory of *societal* change, consisting of a coherent body of empirical generalizations that rests on fundamental Weberian premises. According to these familiar premises, in certain societies transcendentally anchored worldviews and institutions lose social and cultural influence as a result of the dynamics of rationalization (the process in which various social spheres come to operate according to their own standards) and the secularizing impact of Christianity itself (which for various reasons has contributed to the disenchantment of the world and to the legitimization of action in autonomous social spheres). Rationalization produces a pattern of cultural pluralization, social differentiation, and organizational specialization in societies with originally influential, if not dominant, religious cultures and institutions, such as Western societies prior to the Great Transformation. Because Western societies have been most affected by processes of rationalization, they have become deeply secularized. Specifically, where official churches used to control substantial economic resources, the relative wealth and capital of these churches has declined; where authority was once legitimated mainly in religious terms and major political conflicts crucially involved religious motives, bureaucratized states now exercise rational-legal authority and separate civil and ecclesiastical spheres; where full membership in the societal community used to depend on one's religious identity and religiously motivated exclusiveness was common, inclusion on the basis of citizenship has transformed the meaning of membership; where religious institutions and elites maintained clear standards of transcendent belief relevant to all spheres of cultural activity, these institutions have lost their hold on the definition of the societal situation, and science, art, and morality no longer require any religious grounding.

But secularization theory not only consists of such premises and generalizations; it also claims to account for societal *variations* in secularization, relying on contingent features of social change and religious arrangements in different societies. According to the most sophisticated work along these lines (Martin 1978), secularization is properly conceived as a general process of differentiation, but its pace, form, and outcome depend on particular local conditions. These conditions include the frame within which a society entered the modern age. Martin especially emphasizes the differential impact of Calvinist-versus-Enlightenment culture and of monopolistic-versus-pluralistic religious structure. Thus, for example, a federally organized but nationally unified society, characterized by Calvinist-Enlightenment collusion and religious pluralism, would experience stable differentiation with a vigorous religious subculture, whereas in a centralized but socially divided nation, characterized by religion-Enlightenment collision and a near monopolistic religious structure, differentiation is likely to be more contentious, with the dominant religion becoming a declining oppositional force. According to Martin, these patterns fit the United States and France, respectively. In general, then, the universal process of differentiation interacts in various ways with particular social contexts (themselves described in analytical terms) to produce a number of distinct patterns.

Instead of addressing the merits of the Weberian premises or the specifics of Martin's comparative analysis, the major current criticisms of secularization theory attempt to challenge its status as theory, discount the very changes it purports to explain, argue against the diminished social significance of religion, note limitations inherent in the process, point to reversals, and demonstrate the theory's irrelevance under modern circumstances. I argue that these criticisms fail.

Secularization as Theory

The main charge against secularization theory is blunt: there is no theory. In spite of all the claims that have been made on its behalf, the (would-be) emperor has no clothes. This is the main point Hadden made in his presidential address to the Southern Sociological Society (Hadden 1987). "Careful scrutiny reveals that there really is not much of a theory at all" (607), he argues. Rather, secularization is a doctrine, an ideology making an invidious distinction between historical periods (a charge I will examine separately below). Whatever has been said about secularization amounts only to "a hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas" (598); at the very least, "the theory has not been systematically stated or empirically tested" (599). Of course, this argument depends on what is meant by "theory." Hadden apparently uses a quasi-positivist standard: either secularization theory can be formulated as a systematic set of interrelated and testable propositions (cf. 588), supported by the best evidence thus far, or there is little to discuss.

The imputations of ideological bias hardly apply to the main proponents of secularization theory mentioned above. The standard Hadden implicitly uses seems unduly harsh, if only because it would force one to reject not only secularization theory but other theories in historical sociology as well;¹ the

standard is also heavily contested among theorists. But in light of the synopsis I have just presented, my main response to Hadden can be brief: even by his standard there is a body of work that deserves to be called secularization theory. It is a coherent theory, Weberian in inspiration and based on a century of collective scholarly activity, that comprehensively analyzes secularization as a process of differentiation-with-variations.² Hadden in fact recognizes, without elaboration, that at least Martin "has written a treatise that would qualify as a theory" (599). He acknowledges that Dobbelaere "sees the evidence of secularization all around him and is reluctant to challenge the utility of the theory" (599), but dismisses his position because of the variation in the meaning and use of secularization uncovered by Dobbelaere himself. We may infer that Hadden would also reject Dobbelaere's (1985, 1987) more recent systematization of secularization theory. But such rejections do not amount to full-fledged analysis or actual refutation; the strongest evidence in favor of the defendant has been de-emphasized. I suggest that the classical premises combined with the work of several of the premier sociologists of religion today constitute as strong a body of theory as exists on *any* subject in the sociology of religion.

The charge is further weakened by an ambivalent attempt to refute a largely nonexistent theory. Hadden argues, for example, that "the data cannot confirm the historical process predicted by secularization theory," adding immediately that "neither can the data disconfirm the process" (600). Puzzling though the complete irrelevance of data may be, he does not see "how one can fail to conclude that religion stubbornly resists the prophecies of its early demise" (600). An "assessment of trends in religious behavior" (603) similarly goes against secularization theory. However, the refutations miss their target, since secularization theory does not predict in any bland way the "demise" of religion, whatever that may mean, and as a theory of societal change does not primarily address religious behavior of individuals at all. Better put, superficial evidence of levels of religious belief and participation, such as that adduced by Hadden, is relevant only insofar as it can be used not to describe trends in individual religiosity but rather to support critical claims about the social or cultural significance of religious action.³

Secularization as Historical Decline

Secularization theory addresses a particular type of large-scale change that first took place in Western societies by arguing for the decline in cultural and social influence of religious ideas and institutions. The second charge against the theory takes it to task for misinterpreting the historical record by constructing a largely mythological account rather than a trustworthy narrative and explanation (cf. Luckmann 1977). The charge has been made most strongly by Douglas (1983). Arguments about secularization, she suggests, seem to presuppose that there once was a golden age of religion. But this presupposition is a fantasy: there never was such a condition. Secularization is essentially a nineteenth-century notion according to which "modernity adversely affects religion by taking the wonder and mystery out of the universe" — a process of "demystification that is supposed to have reduced the credibility of the old,

traditional forms of religion" (26). But there is "no good evidence that a high level of spirituality has generally been reached by the mass of mankind in past times" or that their lives "were necessarily well integrated by religion" (29). In the final analysis, "everything is wrong because the stereotype of premoderns is wrong" (42). Moreover, the idea that modernization produces a crisis of religion is a partisan view: it ignores new forms of religious behavior that are quite compatible with modernity. Indeed, "the idea that humans are beings who need religion belongs to creation mythology," and, similarly, "the idea that modernization is bad for religion echoes preaching that directly opposes worldliness to salvation" (29). Finally, the usual explanations of secularization are questionable. They depend not only on a definition of religion as good but also on a mistaken view of culture as autonomous. They involve forces, such as the rise of bureaucracy or a new scientific worldview, that do not necessarily produce unprecedented disenchantment.

The central argument against decline has been supported by other scholars. Historical research suggests considerable religious ignorance, deviance, and heresy in supposedly homogeneous and religious premodern communities. Ergo, "they" are not all that different from us. Contemporary surveys show high levels of religious belief and practice among people today. There is stability in at least some respects (cf. again Hadden 1987). Ergo, there is no decline. In short, the historical core of secularization theory has been challenged on both ends of the process: the relatively nonsecular premodern phase and the still surprisingly religious modern phase.

Leaving aside the secondary elements in Douglas's analysis, my main response to her charge is that the imagery of decline (though not demise), recast in terms of the more general theoretical concept of differentiation, makes sense. As I indicate in the introductory synopsis above, secularization theory logically connects a large body of empirical generalizations by means of Weberian premises and a framework that accounts for variations on a universal theme; in doing so, it provides an adequate account of the Western experience. Since Douglas provides no evidence to refute its generalizations about structural change, I maintain that the standard account is largely correct — certainly for Western Europe and, in a different way, for the United States. For secularization theory, the historical statements are instances of a broader pattern of rationalization/differentiation, a pattern that was stimulated by parts of the Christian tradition.⁴ Of course, as all secularization theorists have emphasized, none of the changes I mention above took place in any simple linear fashion.

Although decline in social significance is real enough, the case for secularization does not depend on a vision of a religious golden age. In fact, as is clear from the synopsis I have given, the level of spirituality of the masses is not decisive at all. If in traditional societies intellectual elites and ruling classes used religious faith to preserve their unity, to exert influence, and to define what ultimately mattered in the society (Turner 1983), then popular religiosity is simply not that important. In any case, sociologists are interested in religion as part of the social fabric, not in the quality of individual religiosity per se. Complementing Turner's instrumental view of traditional religion, Mann (1986) has made the case for religion as a particular form of ideological power, which becomes dominant under particular circumstances — as it did in the late Middle

Ages in Europe. As other forms of power are institutionalized, that power declines. For Mann, this is an instance of a more general phenomenon, namely change in the form and relative strength of power networks resulting from internal tensions, environmental contingencies, and the crystallization of alternative forms of power. This is all that is needed to support secularization theory as a general explanation of societal change: a difference over time described in general terms, explained by general statements concerning institutional change with specific historical reference, supported by ample historical evidence.⁵

Expert witnesses further confirm the old conventional wisdom. According to Clebsch (1979), cultural demystification is real. The four constitutive myths of European Christianity became radically differentiated, due largely to autonomous human activity in many spheres, and could no longer serve as constitutive beliefs, holding together an entire culture. These myths were as follows: "First, the earth and its inhabitants came into being uniquely, by divine fiat. Second, the human race received a unique character as bearer of God's image which, however marred, remained indelible. Third, the divine hand guided human history toward a divinely appointed consummation. Fourth, Christ alone bore the status of god-man and his followers alone enjoyed salvation" (243). While even among staunch believers only a minority actually holds strongly to these views, for the functioning of modern cultures and societies they are largely irrelevant. McLeod (1981) confirms the picture of social change for the post-1789 period. In the nineteenth-century process of (partly class-based) polarization, religion was strengthened organizationally and as a basis for the identity of specific communities (cf. Dobbelaere 1987); but this was hardly a brake on secularization, since large numbers of people became disaffected altogether from the churches and religion no longer provided a focus of social unity (McLeod 1981). Carefully tracing the consequences of the social and cultural "unsettlement" in nineteenth-century European societies, Chadwick (1975) presents a similar view of the "radical" and "irreversible" process of secularization (250, 275). In recent decades, with communities in decline, class divisions dissipating, and societies becoming more thoroughly pluralistic, even the religious hold on the social life of its loyal adherents has weakened considerably — at least in most of Europe (cf. McLeod 1981).

Secularization as Institutionalization

According to the third charge, articulated best by Parsons (1978), conventional secularization theory, of the kind presented above, tells only half the story. That is, in the West the account of declining social and cultural influence is valid insofar as it simply outlines a process of differentiation that has taken place during the past few centuries. It involves "a diminution of the religious value of the social and cultural components from which the newly emergent religious one becomes differentiated" (241); it has indeed fundamentally affected traditional religious commitments. Parsons also accepts and elaborates the historical core of secularization theory, retracing the process of modernization as a breakdown of the "medieval synthesis." However, secularization also

means institutionalization. It is not simply a matter of loss or decline; differentiation does not mean that religion is pushed into an irrelevant corner of the social system. If the conditions for successful institutionalization are present, the new social order will be included within a broader sacred order, a new religious significance will be accorded to secular life, and more general values will be legitimated in religious terms. In short, "the secular order may change in the direction of closer approximation of the normative models provided by a religion, or by religion more generally" (240). Historically, this change is precisely what occurred in Western societies, especially in America. Differentiation was indeed also a form of new institutionalization. The pluralistic, inclusive, adaptive framework of modern societies was "another version of the institutionalization of . . . a Christian society" (204). The new phase in sociocultural change is "part of the trend to institutionalization of Christian values in secular society" (208), and the major cycle of human religious development "may be called the Christianization of the world" (262). In America, at least, a new civil religion provides genuine religious grounding for a pluralistic culture and inclusive societal community; both individualism and active participation in the world are religiously legitimated.

This line of argument may seem attractive from a liberal-Protestant point of view; it certainly comes close to a peculiar American form of self-congratulation — America, on this account, is still a "city on a hill." Unfortunately, for theoretical and historical reasons, it does not work. First, for Parsons "what has come generally to be called 'religion' stands at the highest level in the cybernetic hierarchy of the forces which . . . controls the processes of human action" (240). Thus, if there is to be social order, there must be some sort of religion. The disappearance and certainly the social irrelevance of religion are theoretically inconceivable for Parsons. But this viewpoint means that the other side of secularization is a foregone conclusion: it simply follows from the basic conceptualization of religion. To be sure, Parsons has added the qualification that institutionalization only takes place under certain conditions, but he has left these conditions vague and essentially has postulated that they prevailed in American society.

To make the case that the main features of modern societies described by Parsons are indeed the result of a process of institutionalization of specifically religious (that is, Christian) values, it is necessary to show specific historical continuities. This Parsons rarely does. Rather than show how denominationalism institutionalizes a Christian principle (a principle that was somehow generalized), he points out that it has become legitimate for most churches. If civil religion is different from traditional faith in content and function, as Parsons and Bellah have maintained, there is obviously a fundamental discontinuity. The religious dimension of modern activism is simply defended by references to Weber's concept of the calling, without confronting the possibility of radically new (and secular) meanings. How the overall model of the modern open society can be another type of Christian society is never satisfactorily explained. The case for continuity is weak at best. In fact, I suggest, the conditions for institutionalization along Parsonsian lines have been largely absent. Religious legitimation for new pluralism and inclusion came about mostly as support after the fact for compromises that had to be accepted as

inevitable. By analogy with Blumenberg's (1983) forceful argument against views of modern ideas as secular versions of religious ones, it should be emphasized that with the Enlightenment fundamentally new ideas were introduced that radically challenged Christian conceptions (and, of course, were perceived as challenges). Since even ideas and institutions that seemed to have some connection with Christian predecessors (e.g., the idea of personhood or the voluntary association) functioned henceforth in a new secular order, the old conventional wisdom holds. Parsons's own argument concerning differentiation, which accounts for discontinuity and fits well with the Weber-Martin treatment of secularization, actually reinforces this wisdom; the apparently contradictory argument for institutionalization fails.

Secularization as a Self-Limiting Process

Stark and Bainbridge (1987) also accuse secularization theory of telling only half the story; however, the other half they supply is different from the account given by Parsons. Since the substantive differences between Parsonsian action theory and the behaviorist tradition on which they draw are considerable, this difference in accounts is not that surprising. In spite of the disagreements, on which I cannot elaborate here, Stark and Bainbridge also support much if not most of conventional secularization theory. Defining secularization as "the progressive loss of power by religious organizations" (293), they restate various causes of this process in terms of their own theory. Above all, they emphasize that progress generates new cultural systems that effectively challenge the provision of specific compensators and general explanations by traditional religions; the explanations religions provide gradually tend to be disconfirmed. Moreover, the pluralism of a cosmopolitan society tends to "lower the market value of any given general compensator" (290); in such a society, "social and geographic mobility tends to sever the ties of religious affiliation" (293). Sometimes, the prospects for religion may be worse, namely where a state consisting of a political monopoly seeks to repress religion (299). Internal developments in religious traditions may actually promote secularization as well — a point made earlier, on different grounds, by Berger (1969). When such traditions come to center around a single, infinite God who cannot intervene in human affairs and has little to offer as specific rewards, religious organizations and elites can claim few rewards for themselves; in fact, it then becomes impossible to sustain a powerful religious organization. Without evaluating the validity of this part of the argument, I simply note that it supports secularization theory in the Weber-Wilson-Martin tradition, albeit for sometimes unorthodox or questionable reasons.

What, then, is the other half of the story? Stark and Bainbridge attempt to show that "secularization is a self-limiting process" (311). While some low-tension religious organizations may succumb to secularity, more high-tension religious organizations may continue to provide specific compensators. Secularization stimulates the development of and recruitment to sect movements, which is made possible mainly by the fact that "cultural progress cannot eliminate the need for highly general compensators or for every specific

compensator" (304). In cosmopolitan societies, people, especially those at turning points in their lives and without significant affiliations, are likely to become members of new religious groups. Disaffiliation and attrition are compensated by reaffiliation and growth. In the end, "the factors encouraging the growth of religion are of similar magnitude to those pressing to reduce religion" (312).

Stark and Bainbridge's argument fails for several reasons. First, recall that they define secularization as the progressive loss of social power by religious organizations. Yet their argument against secularization only refers to formation of new groups and recruitment into them, without analyzing their power in any way. If sects and cults are mere quasi-therapeutic sideshows, their emergence hardly constitutes the empowerment of religion. Even short of that possibility, revival and innovation as such are not sufficient evidence of a built-in limitation in the secularization process. Of course, this insufficiency applies to other claims about religious revival as well: the common though incorrect inference is that continued faith on the part of significant, even growing numbers of individuals refutes secularization theory. The very idea is unsociological. It does not affect the theory as outlined above.

Second, if in cosmopolitan societies more people become disaffiliated and some high-tension organizations continue to function, recruitment into at least some of them is demographically inevitable; some such organizations will attract at least some newly available customers to their product. While this recruitment may increase the power of certain kinds of religious organizations, an argument to that effect requires structural analysis, not simply evidence of high-tension beliefs or new growth. To refute secularization theory, as briefly presented above, evidence is needed of lasting increases in the social power of religious organizations in the face of ongoing modernizing changes in the society at large.

Third, revivals happen, but they happen more in some societies than in others. Stark and Bainbridge recognize this when they say that if political high-tension groups compete with religious ones, the latter may suffer. On the whole, however, their argument shows an American bias. In a society with a tradition of revivalism and an open religious marketplace, where new enterprises can be started easily and legitimately and where religious choice and change by individuals are socially legitimate, revivals and innovation are indeed to be expected. But nothing similar is to be found in most Western European countries. The upshot is that while secularization can perhaps be limited under certain societal conditions, it is certainly not a self-limiting process. By the logic of Stark and Bainbridge's own argument it is hard to see how secularization could be self-limiting at all. Once progress has disconfirmed most general religious explanations, once alternative social and cultural systems are firmly institutionalized, once a pattern of free and frequent disaffiliation by individuals has become accepted, it is hard to see how the process can be reversed. Their positivist faith in progress seems to rule out a genuine comeback of religion — which is what would be needed to prove that secularization actually is a self-limiting process.

Secularization as Transformation

The fifth charge against secularization theory focuses on its presumed misinterpretation of religious decline. Crippen (1988) provides a recent statement of this position. Conceding that secularization theorists have correctly stated the main facts of religious life in the West, he mobilizes both recent and classical literature to suggest that these agreed-on facts should be seen "as evidence of religious transformation, rather than as signs of religious degeneration" (317). Acknowledging that Wilson's (1982) interpretation of the facts concerning the diminishing social role of religious agencies and the diminishing cultural role of supernatural concerns is largely correct, Crippen argues that Western societies have simply changed their ways of construing the sacred, substituting new gods for old ones. "We are collective creatures," he concludes, "and we symbolize collective strengths and purposes by reference to sacred imagery. If indeed 'the old gods are dying,' as proponents of the secularization thesis insist, then we ought to search for the new gods that are struggling to be born before pronouncing the demise of an erstwhile component of human sociocultural systems" (333).

In many ways this is a curious argument. First, it is not clear that secularization theory needs to be defended here. A simple demurrer seems in order. The (Durkheimian) complaint against the (Weber-inspired) theory fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted. After all, the validity of the historical content of the theory is granted. Moreover, the actual arguments are directed against notions of the demise of religion as a "component of human sociocultural systems" and challenge the idea that the facts constitute "unambiguous evidence of the demise of religious symbols" (327). Since this is not what secularization theory argues, as I make clear in my synopsis, the issue is a red herring. Most importantly, explicit cautionary claims by Wilson notwithstanding, the critique depends entirely on a quasi-functionalist definition of religion. For good reasons, secularization theory has always rejected this definition; thus the critique must fail.

The transformation thesis is in fact a good illustration of the dangers of using a functionalist definition of religion. According to Crippen, religion is "a basic organizational and cultural component of every known human society"; hence it is universal (319-20). So (an easy inference indeed) what appears to be decay can only be transformation. Degeneration, let alone demise, is impossible by definition. Thus one must look for the new gods that necessarily will replace the old. If the definition is broad enough, anything will fit. Apart from the apparent weaknesses of such arguments-by-definition, emphasis on some bland universality of religion obviously makes it difficult to make sense of variations in the significance of religion, which is what secularization theory is about. The transformation thesis simply misses the mark by presupposing that the new gods will be as strong as and functionally equivalent to the old ones; indeed, according to Crippen, the new religious rituals and symbols "are no less sacred in contrast to any other religious beliefs and rituals" (327) — though by what standards remains unclear.

Even in matters of definition, Crippen's argument fails on account of fuzziness. Defended only by the assertion that a functionalist definition "does

not necessarily stress only cohesive functions" (320), religion is declared to be centered on "sacred symbols," which "inspire the sense of awesome force that is the singular feature of religious beliefs and rites" (328-29). Now there is nothing particularly functionalist about this definition, nor is it clear how the sense of awesome force one may experience at the sight of a Michael Jordan slam dunk is different from the awe that is here supposed to be the defining feature of religion. The argument for replacement of old gods by new ones does presuppose that both inspire the same kind of awe, which is hard to prove, to put it mildly. In view of the problems raised by Crippen's quasi-functionalist view of religion, let us not forget that apart from clarity and theoretical usefulness (cf. Robertson 1970), the substantive definition of religion still has, in Wilson's (1982) words, "the incidental virtue of being in conformity with general usage" (320).

Strictly speaking, the transformation thesis should hold that all that has happened in the West and all that can be accounted for sociologically is a change in form of the old religious symbols and practices. Since Crippen recognizes that the new gods, the new conceptions of the sacred, are indeed new, there is no transformation, only replacement. Thus he is protected against Blumenberg's (1983) critique of actual transformation theories, which challenges the common view that modern, seemingly secular concepts and institutions are only new manifestations of old religious/theological ideas and institutions. The new gods Crippen brings to the fore are creatures of the human imagination; what he regards as a new form of religion is, by conventional standards, simple and typically modern idolatry. That such new symbols and practices could be regarded as mere transformation of religion is itself a nice illustration for secularization theory.

Secularization and Fundamentalism

We have seen how arguments based on evidence of religious continuity or revivals do not seriously affect the status of secularization theory. A more serious counter-argument is suggested, at least implicitly, by recent work on fundamentalism (Ammerman 1987; Hunter 1983; cf. Lechner 1985, 1989a, 1990). More than a mere revival of religious faith, so students of fundamentalism have argued, fundamentalism constitutes a genuine and surprising reversal of the very process of secularization. What could not happen according to conventional theory did happen. Opposing the results of secularization on the basis of an all-encompassing religious worldview and by means of a social movement that aims to restore a more religiously meaningful social order, the rise of fundamentalism amounts to a practical refutation of secularization theory. Here, at least, religion is being made socially and culturally influential again — which is the very hallmark of fundamentalism. In fact, it seems, modernization necessarily spawns and provides opportunities for antimodern fundamentalist reactions.

This line of argument is plausible but problematic. To be sure, if in any Western society a large fundamentalist movement was encountered that would successfully turn back the clock, one would be forced to reconsider conventional

secularization theory. Although, strictly speaking, secularization theory as presented above does not rule out such reversals if societal conditions change in unforeseen ways, the fundamentalist reaction is indeed desecularizing, at least in societies where such secularization has taken place. But not all forms of fundamentalism are puzzling. Even in the early period of secularization in Europe, defensive reactions occurred (for example, by the Catholic church). Such reactions, like modern manifestations of fundamentalism, presuppose that some kind of secularization is in progress — no fundamentalism without (prior) secularization. In some societies, such reactions are to be expected. For example, if in a pluralistic society a conservative religious subculture can legitimately maintain itself, then, in response to certain kinds of social changes, periodic fundamentalist movement activity is possible. In some societies, however, the cultural and institutional conditions for such a phenomenon are lacking. Thus in America the seemingly surprising political rebirth of fundamentalism is sociologically plausible; in Europe it would have been far more puzzling. But this fact means that fundamentalism is only a local phenomenon, not an inherent feature or outcome of secularization as such. Insofar as it accounts for variations in the social and cultural strength of religious institutions and worldviews, secularization theory (such as in Martin's version) actually helps to predict the likelihood and potential social impact of new kinds of fundamentalism. Most importantly, it emphasizes the conditions that make full-fledged implementation of a fundamentalist program unlikely. Since even in the United States the new fundamentalism has been subject to all kinds of internal and external constraints (as the sources cited above, as well as Bruce (1989), make clear), there is no reversal on account of which secularization theory has to be modified. The very pattern of development of American fundamentalism, as elaborated by its main students, actually confirms the conventional wisdom on secularization.⁶

Secularization and Globalization

The final charge against secularization theory is not that it is wrong but that it is irrelevant. This charge is one implication of Robertson's (1984, 1987, 1991) recent work on globalization, which critically complements the Wallersteinian world-systemic turn in political economy. Granting the validity of the classical account of secularization, he elaborates some variations on the theme in his own earlier work, relying on a substantive conception of religion (Robertson 1970). For a reconstruction of the Western experience, secularization theory may still be useful. However, the central task for sociological theory and research, so Robertson would argue, now is to examine the process of globalization, the way in which a new sociocultural order is emerging on an unprecedented scale. At the very least, the tendency of conventional secularization theory to treat secularization as something that happens to individual societies, independent of any transsocietal context, must be revised. More importantly, since the Western historical experience is only one component in this process, it cannot be the basis for a new global theory. The new world system did not start under any identifiable sacred canopy and was not dominated by specifically religious

institutions, unless one wants to take as a starting point the world system of medieval Christendom. Even so, the conventional terms and explanations in Western-centered secularization theory are of dubious relevance as the world moves into a phase of globalization that is no longer Euro-centered. In fact, the cultural influence of Western self-interpretations becomes a problem for globalization theory. The very idea of secularization, so it appears from Robertson's global point of view, is part of a Western image of the globe that has its roots in core countries of Christian origin. It can no longer be treated as an explanation of current religious change, but rather must itself be interpreted in terms of a new kind of theory.

These points directed against the relevance of secularization theory are well taken. Robertson is certainly right about the need for a shift to a new level of analysis. His emerging globalization theory properly places secularization theory in a new light, treating it as at best a partial account of a part of the overall process of global change and as a problematic component of global culture. Still, both the problems and content of secularization theory, if not Martin's comparative framework, may have something to offer in the new phase of sociological analysis initiated by Robertson and others.

Globalization refers to the emergence of new global social structures and cultural categories. However, the model for such structures and categories is still the Western model of a liberal social order; what is being transformed in the process of globalization are largely features of a world system first institutionalized by Western societies. Since both the liberal model and the emerging world system are characterized above all by their movement away from Christendom and have relegated religious symbols and institutions to subordinate roles, globalization is at least partly a process of secularization. Since globalization is in part the globalization of differentiated Western societal structures, the outcome of the process also reflects the Western secularization experience. Religion is being differentiated-out on a global scale; cultural pluralism and social inclusion are being institutionalized, albeit hesitantly, in quasi-legal form. Religion does not legitimate this new world. Among the new worldviews, global categories and sources of ultimate concern identified by Robertson, only some are distinctly religious, unless the definition of religion is broadened to include any attempt to construct a meaningful world. While it is possible to discern a new global discourse about global problems in which specifically religious ideas and organizations do play a role, there is no specific religious grounding for either economic or political activity on the world scene.

Insofar as this world scene resembles, on a different scale, the old *gesellschaft* model central to secularization theory, the implications for religion will also be similar to those familiar from Western history. Even if such reasoning by analogy turns out to have little value as the world system moves farther away from Western models and precedents, secularization theory remains relevant for globalization theory. For one thing, in going beyond secularization, globalization theory will still have to explain what difference the emerging world system makes to societal secularization and what distinguishes the religious dimension of the world system from religious arrangements and change in particular societies. More importantly, secularization theory, as well as the nineteenth-century intellectual discourse from which it emerged, may still contain some

insights relevant to current work on global problems. After all, the problems addressed by conventional theory, in sociology and other disciplines, bear some similarity to the problems now facing religious traditions — such as the problems of maintaining their integrity in a radically pluralistic situation and of defining a vigorous sociocultural role in the face of rationalized political and economic structures. Secularization theory is at the core of the sociological account of modernity, and rightly so; similarly, the story of the transformation of religious traditions in the new global condition will be an important part of any adequate form of world-system analysis. The plot in both stories, I suggest tentatively, will show some considerable parallels. Thus, while there may come a time when secularization theory will be relegated to a special institution for the preservation of sociological relics from another age, at this point such forced retirement seems premature.

Summary

By rebutting the charges against secularization theory I do not mean to suggest that it is perfect. In fact, the theory may have to be significantly revised if these or other charges can be sufficiently strengthened in the future; genuine counterexamples to the patterns outlined by Martin (1978), rather than merely superficial anomalies, would similarly mandate revision, or even full-fledged refutation.⁷ Perhaps more importantly, secularization theory, like many other theories in historical sociology, remains ethnocentric insofar as it originates in and focuses on large-scale changes in Western societies; its relevance to modernizing but non-Christian societies is a largely unsolved problem. As the previous section already suggests, it is quite conceivable that secularization theory may become of merely historical interest, especially when and where secularization has played itself out (cf. Lechner 1989b). In addition, it is important to bear in mind the limited scope of secularization theory: it is not a theory of all things religious or of the demise of religion. Inflated expectations may have inspired some of the criticisms I have tried to refute; but the fact that there are many questions it does not claim to answer can hardly be held against it.

Yet while the classical, now conventional account of secularization may not be perfect, it is still largely valid. Represented today by scholars such as Wilson, Martin, and Dobbelaere, it can defend itself adequately against all the main charges leveled against it. There is a body of theory. There is a valid historical content to it. Secularization cannot be reinterpreted either as institutionalization or as transformation. It is not a self-limiting process. Fundamentalist reactions and reversals qualifying as practical refutations are thus far easily accommodated. While sociologists will have to go beyond secularization as attention shifts to religion in the world system, this need does not yet make secularization theory irrelevant.

I move that the charges be dismissed.

Notes

1. Of course, my point is not to taint other theories with guilt by association. In fact, I think several good theories of large-scale changes *do* exist. I only wish to claim that secularization theory is just as much a theory as various other ones in historical sociology; indeed, I suggest that secularization theory is an important complement to these other theories. Only strict positivist treatment of such theories (as exemplified by the reception of world-system theory among historians) may lead to dismissal in Hadden-like fashion.

2. Martin's theory, properly understood, can account for several seemingly anomalous cases. For example, in a condition of high pluralism and advanced differentiation, Martin would expect strong religious institutions to develop, which periodically and legitimately may be mobilized for communal or political purposes — as in the case of the American civil rights movement. Where religious monopolies are strongly associated with national identity and this identity is threatened by outside forces, religious institutions may lose official social influence in various institutions but will retain considerable significance both in shaping national culture and in determining the grounds for full membership in the community — as in the case of the Catholic church in Poland. Martin's theory suggests that as the external situation of Poland normalizes, internal differentiation should increasingly come to resemble the pattern of other historically Catholic societies.

3. Individual-level data *can* be used to evaluate secularization theory, but *only* if the warnings of various theorists are heeded and these data are carefully linked to patterns in social action — something Greeley (1989) does not appear to do in spite of his empirical sophistication. Note that careful secularization theorists would not even take decline in behavioral indicators as *prima facie* supporting evidence, since this decline may be entirely unrelated to the processes covered by the theory (Silverman 1989:440). Insofar as secularization theory posits a decline, it can use as criteria only identifiable changes in (institutional or cultural) religious involvement in institutional or cultural spheres — as briefly illustrated in the next section. For a modest but appropriate example, see Silverman (1989). Unfortunately, "measuring" such decline is likely to remain a matter of using subtle historical judgment, as demonstrated in much of the literature on which the work of Wilson and Martin is based, rather than easily quantifiable indicators.

4. In this respect, secularization theory largely elaborates on the standard Weberian account of the rationalization of economic action, structures of authority, and law (cf. Schluchter 1981, 1989).

5. Mann in fact presents a theory of changes in the social significance of different kinds of power. His main yardstick for secularization would be straightforward, namely the extent to which transcendent-ideological power loses influence over other networks and over the relationships between networks — a decline that can be treated in exactly the same context-dependent way as other changes with which Mann deals, such as the *relative* decline in the significance of military power in an earlier era.

6. Thus, while in premodern periods some religious movements were able to set long-lasting constraints for societal development, fundamentalist movements of the kind discussed here cannot institutionalize their symbolic program or transform the core values held in a society. Implicit in the preceding discussion is one criterion by which to measure the impact of reversals, namely, the extent to which a movement is able to effect sustained *dedifferentiation* in several institutional spheres. However, just as secularization follows distinct patterns depending on contingent local factors, what counts as reversal must also depend in part on the particular social context of a movement. Obviously, secularization theory does not claim that wholesale reversals of rationalization/differentiation processes are impossible — it posits no "laws of history" of the kind long since ridiculed by Karl Popper and others.

7. Acknowledging that the theory is vulnerable to critical scrutiny hardly constitutes an admission of fault; rather, it is the mark of any decent theory — something that is presupposed by critics who think secularization theory can be refuted and that such refutation is worth the effort. Although elaborating on possible future refutations would not fit the purpose and format of this article, I emphasize that the theory *can* be refuted if the charges rebutted here can be upheld or if successful counterexamples to the Martin patterns can be constructed. Especially the latter must remain, for now, a worthwhile task for future research.

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