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Bryan Wilson's Contributions to the Study of Secularization

For Bryan Wilson, secularization refers to the fact that religion has lost influence at the societal, the institutional and the individual level. For him, individual secularization is about the loss of authority of the Churches to define what people should believe, practise and accept as moral principles guiding their lives. In other words, individual piety may still persist, however, if it develops independently of religious authorities, then it is an indication of individual secularization. Wilson has furthermore stressed the consequences of the process of societalization in modern societies and on this basis he formulated his thesis that secularization is linked to the decline of community and is a concomitant of societalization. It is also typical of Wilson that he uses the Catholic Church as his reference to evaluate institutional secularization. Finally, in Wilson's work a moral evaluation is present: since a society, even a modern one, cannot survive on procedural values alone, it needs substantive values as well. Consequently, he asked: which institution will socialize the new generations in such values now that religion has lost its impact and the educational system has taken on the characteristics of modern society itself?

Key words: authority · religion · secularization · values

Pour Bryan Wilson, la sécularisation se réfère au fait que la religion a perdu son influence aux niveaux sociétal, institutionnel et individuel. Selon lui, la sécularisation individuelle résulte de la perte d'autorité des Eglises qui ne peuvent plus définir ce que les personnes doivent croire, pratiquer et accepter comme principes moraux pour guider leur vie. En d'autres termes, la piété individuelle peut encore persister. Mais si elle se développe indépendamment des autorités religieuses, il s'agit alors d'un indicateur de la sécularisation individuelle. Par ailleurs, Wilson a insisté sur les conséquences du processus de sociétalisation dans les sociétés modernes et, sur cette base, il a développé la thèse selon laquelle la sécularisation est liée au déclin de la communauté et coïncide avec la sociétalisation. De manière caractéristique, Wilson a pris pour exemple l'Eglise catholique afin d'évaluer la sécularisation institutionnelle. Pour finir, les travaux de Wilson contiennent une évaluation d'ordre moral: une société, même moderne, ne peut survivre uniquement grâce à des valeurs pratiques et bureaucratiques, elle a également besoin de valeurs substantives. En conséquence, quelle institution, se demandait-il, va socialiser les nouvelles générations à ces valeurs, à présent que la religion a perdu son impact et que le système éducatif a lui-même épousé les caractéristiques de la société moderne?

Mots-clés: autorité · religion · sécularisation · valeurs

Although Bryan Wilson did not consider his book *Religion in Secular Society*, first published in 1966, as an essay on secularization, I will start my analysis of his publications on secularization with this book, since in studies and discussions, it is often referred to by his colleagues as a study on secularization in England and the USA, and indeed the concept is widely used in the book. But also, because, in closely re-reading it for the purpose of this tribute, I discovered that in this book his conception of secularization and its levels of analysis were already very clearly spelled out. For Wilson, secularization refers “to the fact that religion—seen as a way of thinking, as the performance of particular practices, and as the institutionalization and organization of these patterns of thought and actions—has lost influence” at the *societal* and at the *individual* level ([1966] 1969: 11, 10). But secularization is also present at the *institutional and the organizational* level of religions. It represents an adjustment of religion to new conditions, for example, recent trends in ecumenicalism ([1966] 1969: 168–205). However, organizational secularization, what Luckmann (1967: 36) called “internal secularization”, is not new, it already has occurred in the past. Protestantism or Methodism represents, in Wilson’s view, a process of institutional secularization: “the elimination of mystical, sacerdotal elements from the religious system” (1976b: 261). Here and in his evaluation of societal secularization, his reference, his baseline, is the Catholic Church.

Wilson on Individual Secularization

In the literature, there is almost no discussion about the loss of social significance of religion on the societal level. Even Rodney Stark, who calls secularization theory a “doctrine” to be carried “to the graveyard of failed theories” (Stark, 1999: 270), agrees, in the same article, on “a decline in the social power of once-dominant religious institutions whereby other social institutions . . . have escaped from prior religious domination”, but he immediately adds: “If this were all that secularization means, there would be nothing to argue about” (1999: 252). However, for him, secularization theory is primarily concerned with “individual piety, especially belief” and he goes on demonstrating that the myth of religious decline has not occurred (1999: 251–254). He is not the only one, also Peter Berger, David Martin and Grace Davie, to mention a few (Woodhead et al., 2001), refer to a continuing individual religiousness or “religious sensitivity” to falsify the secularization theory, of which Wilson is considered the flag-bearer.

The problem is, I think, that they did not read carefully enough Wilson’s definition of individual secularization: his argument is in fact that “Churches are losing direct influence over the ideas and activities of men” ([1966] 1969: 22), to wit their beliefs, practices and moral principles. He interprets differently the same statistics as his critics, i.e. as indications that institutionalized religion has lost its authority over individual beliefs, practices and moral principles. For him, secularization is about the loss of authority of the Churches to define what people should believe, practise and accept as moral principles guiding their lives. In other words, it is not only a question

of the decline but also of the *transformation of religion outside the scope of religious authorities* and quite often on an individual basis. Or if you like, it is a question of what Chaves called the “decrease in the extent to which individual actions are subject to religious control” (1994: 757). If, for example, the belief in “God as a person” has declined in recent decades and is replaced by a belief in “God as a spirit or life force”, which still adds up to more than 70 percent of Europeans believing in God (Halman, 2001: 94), then Wilson would call that an indication of individual secularization. “Religious bricolage” or “religion à la carte”, that so many sociologists have traced, points to the same. Commenting on “religion à la carte”, a newly installed Belgian bishop retorted in his first interview with the press that a religion à la carte was unacceptable for religious authorities, since they, and they alone, were able to define true beliefs and practices.

If one accepts that the individual transformation of religion is an aspect of secularization, then Berger's suggestion of a “shift in the institutional location of religion” is also individual secularization. It does, however, not preclude the existence of individual religiosity or spirituality; it only points out that in defining this type of religiosity, religious authorities have lost the power to impose their definitions on more and more people. Consequently, it is very clear that Wilson was referring to institutionalized religion when studying secularization, which also implies a substantive definition of religion. A theory of secularization cannot be developed with a functional definition of religion, since with such a definition all “meaning systems” should be called religion. However, that does not preclude sociologists from working with a functional definition, but then they will analyse changes in the field of meaning systems, religions included, and should not talk about secularization.

How Did Wilson Explain the Process of Secularization?

Most of Wilson's work is on societal secularization, and in order to be able to evaluate the social change that he calls secularization, he needed a reference, a baseline. For him it is “the age of religiously prescribed social order”, to wit, the period that the Church was able to control “the formal process of political, juridical, commercial, and social intercourse”, i.e. the age of Innocent III, the 12th century (1976a: 9–10). Here again, the kernel of the definition is the same as in individual secularization: the loss of power of the religious authorities over time to prescribe the institutional order. How did this occur?

Wilson (1998: 48) underlined that:

Secularization does not occur in the same way in different countries or even in different regions: the specificity of cultural conditions and historical circumstances ensures that the process by which religion loses social influence follows a distinctive, perhaps even a unique course in each separate social setting . . . Nor is it implied that secularization leads to one inevitable condition or proceeds at a uniform pace . . . Even so, common underlying tendencies can be discerned beneath the particular empirical evidence of each of various cases.

The processes that he and many other sociologists of religion use to explain these trends are present in his work. At the societal level, he points out structural/functional differentiation, resulting in the autonomization of the subsystems, which allows the development of functional rationality and the establishment of large-scale organizations. In such organizations, he stated, the actions are "calculated, systemic, regulated, and routinized" (1985: 19).

Then, the argument becomes more Wilsonian by opposing community to society, building on Tönnies' dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Wilson, 1982: 151–156). Society cannot function, as the community did, on the basis of religiously prescribed rules based on mores that have a moral underpinning. "Control in societal systems ceases to depend on supernatural concepts, shifting from moral suasions to technical imperatives" (1976b: 267). We only have to think about the conveyor-belt, the time-clock, the traffic lights, the unmanned cameras, the condoms, the credit cards, etc. "Control has become impersonal and amoral, a matter for routine techniques and unknown officials" (1976a: 20). It is achieved by strictly technical devices and by legal procedures (1976b: 268), e.g. sexual mores are now replaced by condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS. Thus religion has lost one of its important latent functions: as long as control was interpersonal, it was founded on religiously based mores and substantive values. Consequently, the systemic world has undermined the moral authority of the religious organizations, churches and sects. In fact, Wilson interprets modernization as a shift from community to society and formulates his thesis that "secularization is the decline of community: secularization is a concomitant of societalization" (1976b: 265–266; 1982: 154). There is another argument why this is so: since religion offers "redemption", which is personal, total, an "indivisible ultimate" unsusceptible to rational techniques or "cost-efficiency criteria", it has, according to him, to be offered in a "community" (1976b: 272–274), and societalization has destroyed communal life. Consequently, rites of passage have also lost their communal function: "Local life now needs no celebration: what is there to celebrate when the community that sleeps together is not the community that works¹ together or plays together?" (1982: 160). Baptism is at most a family rite, many parents refuse collective baptism since they do not know the other families, and church funerals do not bring the parish together but family, friends and colleagues, i.e. multiple networks, not a community.

Wilson underlined also the effect of science, a product of empirical and rational procedures, on the decline of individual religiosity ([1966] 1969: 63–71). In the past, "Religion interpreted the cosmos, giving sense to the physical and the social world, and meaning and purpose to the lives of men, even if that meaning was more of the order of affective reassurance than of intellectual discourse" (1976b: 267). Now, explanations of our world are given by experts in strictly scientific terms. And "The unexplained is no longer the 'mystery', it is only the 'as yet unsolved problem'" (1976b: 268). This also accelerated the loss of authority of the religious interpretations.

Where, in the past, churches had been able to monopolize a religious interpretation of the world, the weakening of their authority allowed the development of alternative a- and anti-religious meaning systems and alternative

religious interpretations. This changed the religious market: sectarian movements became active proselytizers, NRMs migrated to Western Europe and also ancient religions from the Far East, like branches of Buddhism. "Alien ideas" imposed themselves also on the media. Alongside a steadily declining number of religiously involved individuals in the established churches, alternative forms of religiosity became attractive for Westerners. Some sociologists have interpreted the emergence and increase of numbers of individuals involved in NRMs as a counter-indication of secularization. Not Wilson (1998: 54, 58–59): he has pointed out the small number of adherents and the weak hold these movements have on recruits. He has even questioned their religious character since many of these movements have a religiosity "modelled on the type of rational procedures and assumptions characteristic of a science", which is thus "thoroughly congruent with the rationalized, and hence secularized, procedures of the modern Western world".

Epilogue

Having made his analysis of modern society and described the process of societalization and its concomitant secularization, he, like Weber, mused in his college room, in his community of fellows, about what was lost and what is to come: "Will the social order survive?" He wrote:

In the role-articulated society, love, trust, humanity are not the basis on which operations are conducted. Moral and humane faculties are replaced by technical criteria. The very facelessness of the system makes trust, personal regard, affective relations less relevant, perhaps even an impediment to the smooth operation of highly routinized, mechanical operations. Yet without trust, without mutuality, without civic responsibility and disinterested goodwill, even highly rational systems cannot work. There is still an ultimate dependence on human dispositions. Thus we have the paradox that societalization leads to secularization, but threatens the basic value-orientations on which any kind of this human society must depend. (1976b: 276)

And, in 1982, he described the many expressions of man's discontent with the society they have built, e.g. the breakdown of civic order in urban contexts, the exploitation and pollution of the natural environment (1982: 177–179).

In the past, religion provided and maintained social capital based on substantive values such as commitment, trust, disinterested goodwill, mutuality, social concern and civic consciousness. Modern societies tend to rely increasingly on the schools to socialize young people in the values of the civic order without which even a rational social system cannot work. However, we may ask, he wrote, "whether, in the contemporary conditions, the schools will realize those ends without the contribution of patterns of religious socialization inherited from the past and the moral consciousness stemming from it" (1994: 95). Wilson did not idealize the past, he was aware of the negative aspects of the community (1982: 166–165). What he was looking for was an institution for modern societies like religion, which had given a moral order to a type of society of the past, the community, since religion no longer moves modern people and since the educational system has taken

on the characteristic of modern society itself (1976b: 271): a role-articulated rational organization whose main functional specialization has become training, selection and placement of individuals. His big question was: a society, even a modern one, cannot survive on procedural values alone, it needs substantive values as well: which institution will socialize the new generations in these values now that those who in the past were socialized by religion are a dying generation (1982: 174–179; 1994: 94–96)?

NOTE

¹. The term community is not consistently used in its sociological meaning: here it is used in its everyday meaning, since, according to Wilson, the workplace has become societalized.

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