

CONTEXTUAL SECULARIZATION

Theoretical Thoughts and Empirical Implications

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ABSTRACT: In the last decades, the hypothesis of a secularization of modernizing societies has come under pressure. But does it mean, that we can conclude from all this criticism that secularization theory and its assumptions have become obsolete in the 21st century? I would say no and plead for a well-considered continued use of a contextualized secularization theory. Social, political and cultural circumstances in modern societies should be considered more sensitive, as the ideas of the secularization theory should be complemented by alternative approaches of sociology of religion. Secularization theory is a good starting point to structure the thoughts on the relationship between religion and society. But contextualization is necessary. Historical developments, which determine the cultural context, political surroundings and processes of identity building lead to path dependent secularization and complex developments, including counter effects. The actual task of comparative sociology of religion is to decode the diversity of this processes. Contextualization does not mean to reject secularization theory, only to make their assumptions better. Religious developments depend from the social ecology and can also take trends, which are nonlinear, in form of waves or parabolic. Consequently, different constellations lead to multiple religious vitalities and variations in the timing of secularization.

KEYWORDS: sociology of religion, secularization, path dependency, modernization

REST IN PEACE – SECULARIZATION: AN OBSOLESCENT MODEL?

Having predominated for many years, the hypothesis of a secularization of modernizing societies has increasingly come under pressure over recent decades. Researchers have emphasized the limited applicability of its claims to the European realm owing to the specific historical and cultural development conditions (Hadden 1987; Casanova 1994; Davie 2002). They have replaced it with a new paradigm (Warner 1993), or have even simply declared it to be dead (Stark 1999). Indications of a resurgence of the religious and religions, apparently observable everywhere (Berger et al. 1999; Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008), seemed to make nonsense of secularization theory's prognosis of a progressive loss of the social significance of religion.

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In North America particularly, the rational-choice-based religious market model (Finke and Stark 2006; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000) seemed to replace secularization theory with respect to possible explanations of increasing or decreasing levels of religiosity.

Now, it is usually easier to question theories that state far-reaching or even universal assumptions than theories with middle or limited-range assumptions and to make out counter-examples. Secularization theory is therefore faced with an entire list of issues. There is no global, uniform, simultaneous secularization trend across all countries, nor do the data substantiate the assumption that the global loss of social significance of religion is irreversible. In addition, secularization theory's inextricable combination of modernization and secularization is questionable owing to manifold culture-specific developments (Eisenstadt 2000). Religious revitalization movements, as in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia, can only be conciliated with secularization theory by complementing it with additional assumptions (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Pickel 2009; Stolz 2009).

Can we conclude from all this criticism that secularization theory and its web of assumptions have become obsolete in the 21st century? Can we now close the chapter on the impact of theoretical assumptions of modernization in terms of religion? I believe we should be more discriminating than many critics in judging the value of theory. Even if this debate is not entirely new (Cipriani 2006; Demerath 1995; Lechner 1991; Martin 1965; Shiner 1967; Sommerville 1998; Wilson 1985, 1998), it is worth coming back to. Some of the conclusions from former discussions were devastating; "Secularization will be radically revised or relegated to the category of a marginally useful heuristic pedagogical device" (Hadden 1987, 608). However, it seems odd that such an elaborate and manifold set of hypotheses can be invalidated so quickly and so thoroughly. Empirical findings (Gill 2001; Halman and Draulans 2006; Müller 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Pickel 2009; Voas 2009; Voas and Crockett 2005; Wallis and Bruce 1991) seem to support the assumption of the diminishing social significance of religion. Tschannen's (1991) question, "Should we not learn to give less importance to personal rivalries, to grandiose-sounding, but shallow, statements of intention, and concentrate instead on the job of revising the paradigm that is effectively available (...) in the light of contemporary evidence?" (413), which he raised two decades ago, remains pertinent.

The theoretical debate has developed and the number of empirical findings has increased substantially. This is reason enough to present some thoughts and systematizations that may indicate a further possible application of secularization theory. In doing so, I will briefly outline the assumptions of secularization theory, its variations and issues, and will present a conceptualization of a *contextualized* or *context-sensitive* secularization theory, which will be of use to researchers in the field of sociology of religion. This idea includes the fact that secularization as a process is not universal, but context-dependent and therefore often non-linear. Secularization and revitalization of religion are mostly products of circumstance—and this is in line with the assumptions of secularization theory. I therefore call for a well-considered continued use of secularization theory as a main explanatory approach, which can and should be complemented (not replaced) by alternative approaches.² As many of the empirical findings needed to substantiate the respective hypotheses have been presented in detail elsewhere, and as an additional (although not new) detailed empirical analysis would be beyond the scope of the article, I will refer selectively in the following to empirical proof and concentrate on the systematic arguments.³

² On this point I am near different other colleagues in pointing out the benefit of combining the different approaches (Cipriani 2006, 152; Demerath 1995, 111; Tschannen 1991, 413; Stolz 2009, 370).

³ In addition, I would like to point out Voas and Müller's articles in this volume, which reached similar conclusions. They presented sufficiently profound data, which would otherwise only be copied in this article.

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF SECULARIZATION THEORY

What do we mean when we talk about secularization theory? Initially, it is important to note that there is no one single secularization theory. Rather, the term subsumes a number of ideas that all refer to one main relationship: the fundamental tension between modernization and religion. Provided that modernization progresses, this tension results in a diminishing in the social significance of religion (Berger 1967; Bruce 2002; Wilson 1982). The concept of the diminishing of social significance describes the decreasing importance of religion and religious norms in everyday life. The place of religion is no longer at the centre of everyday life, but on the edge (if at all). In addition, religious authorities succeed in influencing individuals' behaviour to a lesser extent (Chaves 1994, 749-753). This does not imply a loss of faith or increasing irreligiousness. And this is also not what secularization theory insinuates, at least in principle. However, to most secularization theorists (see, for example, Bruce 2002, 30; Pollack 2009, 34-35; Voas 2008, 46), it seems plausible that personal faith is weakened when religious norms, values and authorities are no longer as socially relevant. Consequently, increasing religious indifference is considered to result from the loss of social significance (Voas 2009, 167). This "process of disintegration" is not biographical: once religious belief systems have been established, they usually remain fairly stable over the life course of a person. Instead, religious convictions disintegrate from one generation to the next. Therefore, the erosion of religious beliefs and bondings are the result of a declining religious socialization.

Secularization affects society on a number of different levels. Dobbelaere (2002) differentiated between (1) societal secularization; (2) organizational secularization; and (3) individual secularization. Casanova (1994, 19-39) distinguished between three levels: (1) the loss of personal religiosity; (2) increasing functional differentiation, which is signified by a growing separation of church and state; and (3) the privatization of religion. Bruce (2002, 3) concluded that there are three aspects to secularization: (1) the erosion of faith due to the decreasing number of people who are religious and/or consider religion to be important; (2) the loss of social significance of religion in people's everyday lives and in public debate; and (3) the decreasing importance of religion with respect to non-religious sectors of society, owing to a lower bearing of religious norms. This variety of meanings indicates the problems, as well as the potential, of what is considered to be a part of secularization theory.⁴

There are a number of reasons why secularization is spreading. Firstly, due to processes of rationalization, religious explanations are replaced with causal explanations. Processes of functional differentiation are equally important. In the course of these processes, the initial close interaction with religion ceases in more and more societal sectors (for example, in the education system). Social differentiation within society also undermines the social significance of religion, as it involves the disintegration of traditional internal structures and supporting social networks. This is why the passing on of religious knowledge and religious traditions in the course of socialization in particular is eroding across generations over time. Owing to the rising standards of living in modern industrial societies, the promise of compensation in the hereafter for hardships suffered in life is no longer necessary. Consequently, particularly modern welfare states are characterized by a high degree of secularization (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 62). Economic welfare creates a sense of safety and satisfaction, which in turn causes the hereafter to appear less desirable, let alone necessary. This set of factors linking secularization and modernization is complemented by increasing bureaucratization, urbanization and democratization, which also entail the breakdown of hierarchies, which are of particular importance to religious organizations.

⁴What exactly constitutes the kind of secularity that evolves from the process of secularization is open to debate. Not all kinds of secularity have to refer to religion. However, for the sake of simplicity, secularity will in this article be considered as the negative counter pole to religiosity. I would like to thank all those who contributed their insights on this point, which I gained in the course of the debates on the working unit on "Secularities and Cultural Dynamics" at the University of Leipzig (initiated by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Hubert Seiwert).

This broad range of approaches to secularization theory has given rise to scepticism in the recent past. Hadden (1987, 598), for example, criticized secularization as a “hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas, rather than a systematic theory”. Stark (1999, 251) and Swatos and Christiano (1999, 210) also emphasized the problematic lack of a common theoretical guideline. Stark (1999) indicated secularization theory to be the “product of wishful thinking” and called for “an end to social science faith in the theory of secularization” (261). With reference to all these critiques, Chaves (1994, 750, 770) suggested focusing explicitly on secularization, rather than religion or religiosity. In taking into account Dobbelaere’s (1981, 2002) dimensions of secularization, he proposed to perceive secularization as a loss of influence on the part of “religious authorities” (750).

However, the critics frequently overlook the common focus of the different approaches of secularization theory on the tension between modernization and religious development (see also Tschannen 1991). Sometimes it seems as if the critics are criticizing the core assumption of modernization in general. As an (unrealistic) evolutionary process, modernization theory evokes distrust, which is then transmitted to secularization (Hadden 1987, 588). It seems sometimes also to be wishful thinking, the idea that the religiosity of the people could never seriously decline. According to Bruce (2002, 4), the variety and multi-dimensionality (see also Dobbelaere 1981 and Chaves 1994) of the explanatory approaches in secularization theory are two of its major advantages. It does not depend on a single “explanatory plot”; rather, it is based on several, partly independent, main pillars (Bruce 2011, 27). However, this also implies that the course of secularization may change depending on the various social, cultural and political contextual factors, as well as different detailed explanatory configurations.

ISSUES, CRITIQUE AND COUNTER-ARGUMENTS TO THE “SECULARIZATION THESIS”

Why do the seemingly plausible lines of argument in favour of secularization theory meet with such little approval in recent debates (Bruce 2011, 57)? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to categorize objectively the critical issues.⁵

False Assumption of a Universal Relationship between Modernization and Secularization

First of all, researchers (especially the proponents of the religious market model) question the assumption of a universal relationship between secularization and modernization. In their opinion, the degree of religious vitality mainly depends on the specific political context. Stark (1999), Finke and Stark (2006) Stark and Finke (2000), Iannaccone (1991, 1998) and Stark/Iannaccone (1994) identify the openness and closeness of the religious market as the decisive criterion of religious vitality. Greater market openness leads to greater competition, and competition to religious pluralisation. The resulting greater religious heterogeneity in turn promotes religious vitality in modern societies, which are characterized by individualization and various types of demand structures in plural societies (Chaves and Cann 1992; Fox 2008). According to the religious market model, the openness of the religious market mainly results from the dissolution of the relationship between church and state; the US is the ideal case of a modern, albeit non-secularizing, society, owing to the fact that it ensures this separation in its constitution. Consequently, a theory that emphasizes the consistent presence consistency of secularization in the course of modernization is bound to be wrong.

False Assumption of the Empirical Validity of Secularization

This error of judgement of secularization theory seems to be empirically verifiable. The US, for example, is still characterized by a high degree of religious vitality; it has even increased, rather than decreased, since the beginning of the last century (Finke and Stark 2006). Similarly, the success of religious revitalization movements in Asia or the growing number of charismat-

⁵General, empirically unfounded reproaches of secularization theory are not taken into account here.

ic movements and Pentecostals in Latin America (Martin 2005) seem to refute the assumptions of secularization theory. In several countries in Eastern Europe, there is proof of increasing religiosity, as well as affinity to the church (Pickel 2009; Tomka 2010), once the political repressions that inhibited the religious market ceased to exist. In addition, several countries (Ireland, Poland, Northern Ireland) have persistently withdrawn from the hostilities of secularization and maintain an extremely high level of religiosity, which renders complete secularization in those countries inconceivable. According to Hadden (1987, 600), this gives the impression that secularization theory is not supported by empirical data. At best, there are *some* indications of secularization in Western Europe. However, this is an “exceptional [European] case” (Davie 2002). Due to the particularities of Europe’s historical evolution, the findings that apply to this case cannot be generalized (Casanova 1994, 38).

False Assumption of the Possibility of a Loss of Personal Religiosity

Even in Europe, it is necessary to distinguish subjective religiosity from people’s religious commitment, as well as religion’s social significance. The fact that expressions of subjective religiosity are still widespread, while affiliation to the church is at the same time being eroded, seems to support the individualization thesis of religion (Pollack and Pickel 2007), which emerged from a combination of the privatization thesis by Luckmann (1967) with the later individualization theory by Beck (1992). Thanks to her summing up of the position as “believing without belonging”, Davie (1994) is one of the position’s most prominent proponents. Secularization theory is reproached for implying an erosion of subjective religiosity beyond its statements about the decreasing social significance of religion. This is thought to be impossible, owing to the anthropological necessity of religiosity for the individual. Incidentally, this is what the proponents of individualization theory, as well as the supporters of the religious market model agree upon. Consequently, the market model presupposes a basic level of demand for religion, while the decision on the levels of religious vitality in a certain field rests with the religious supply side. According to the individualization theory of religion, however, religion changes its form. Secularization theorists do not grasp these changes due to their misleading focus on a substantial concept of religion.

False Assumption of a “Golden Age of Faith”

In addition, critics argue that secularization theory’s assumption of a (continuous) decline the social significance of religion presupposes that it used to be more relevant throughout in the past (that is, in pre-modern societies) is wrong. Secularization theory’s assumption of a “Golden Age of Faith” can hardly be sustained (Swatos and Christiano 1999, 219-220; Gorski 2000), which merely proves the fact that secularization theory’s explanatory patterns are frequently ahistorical. Even in early, pre-modern societies, secularization existed—in part, it even gaining predominance at some points (Stark and Finke 2000, 63-68). Therefore, secularization theory’s close association between secularization and modernization is merely one possible explanation for the diminishing in social significance of religion. Least of all, it is possible to assume a linear process of religious erosion from a past “heyday of religion” until today. Consequently, the assumption of a quasievolutionary negative effect of modernization on religion is an illusion. Instead, this image reflects a very simplified understanding of secularity, which erroneously interprets this concept in a strictly modern sense. Rather, it resembles a kind of ideological secularism, which seeks to perceive the world from a certain normative stance. Accordingly, Hadden (1987, 588) considers secularization theory to be “a doctrine more than it is a theory”. The question is, “How did the idea of secularization come to be sacralized?”

False Assumption of a Public Loss of Social Significance

Even the assumption of a loss of social significance seems to have little substance. As religion has been identified *as a* “vital force in the political order” (Swatos and Christiano 1999, 211), there is little evidence of secularization having such an effect. Isn’t religion actually returning to the sphere of international politics (Fox 2008)? Haven’t religions (and their differ-

ences) incited (Huntington 1996) or at least encouraged new political conflicts (Fox 2004)? Hasn't the public significance of religion increased, rather than decreased? Hasn't there been a substantial increase in (religious) fundamentalism? Casanova (1994) points out that secularization theory has misinterpreted secularization in the sense of an increasing separation of church and state as a secularization of the general significance of religion.

However, contrary to secularization theory, it is impossible directly to derive assumptions such as an inevitable loss of individual faith or a privatization of religion from this development. Rather, these developments refer to a different dimension, which may result in secularization or vitalization of religion, depending on the socio-cultural and political context. Hasn't the significance of religions shifted from the political arena to civil society in modern (democratic) societies?

SECULARIZATION AFTER ALL?

Owing to the above-mentioned arguments, over the past decades secularization theory has frequently been declared inadequate or misspecified with respect to its unit of analysis (Tschannen 1991, 395). However, some authors continue to adhere to secularization theory's premises (Bruce 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Pickel 2009; Pollack 2009). Could it be that secularization theory can continue to claim a certain amount of empirical validity and theoretical relevance, despite these empirical and theoretical counter-arguments? In order to answer these questions, it is useful to refer to comparative empirical analyses.

Macro-level					
	Church Members	Church Attendance	Importance of God	Subjective Religiosity	Prayer
HDI	-,47***	-,67***	-,57***	-,48***	-,42***
GDP per capita	-,46***	-,51***	-,31**	-,34**	-,34**
Political stability	-,40***	-,42***	-,57***	-,46***	-,50***
Protestant cultural legacy	-,35**	-,38**	-,50***	-,40**	-,34**
Regulation of religion	,24*	n.s.	,24*	n.s.	n.s.
Support of religion	,31**	n.s.	n.s.	,26*	n.s.
Micro-level					
Social status	-,01*	-,08**	-,07**	-,05**	n.s.
Level of education	-,10**	-,17**	-,15**	-,13**	-,08**
Satisfaction with financial situation	-,03*	-,03*	-,05*	-,04*	-,02*
Economic situation	n.s.	-,04*	-,07**	-,05*	-,04*

Table 1: Relationships between indicators of religiosity and modernization

Source: Calculations on the micro-level are based on World Values Surveys (WVS) wave 5 (2005-08), n=59,000. Calculations on the macro-level are based on an aggregate data set including WVS (2005-08); European Values Study (2008); Afrobarometer (2008); Latinobarometro (2007); International Social Survey Programme (2008); bivariate correlations (Pearsons r); * = significant at p <.05; ** = significant at p <.01; *** = significant at p <.001 (also Gladkich 2011); Church attendance = mean of church attendance per year; subjective religiosity = self-placement on a 10-point-scale for religiosity; prayer = frequency of prayer⁶; macro data from Human Development Reports, World Bank and Religion and State-Project of Fox (<http://www.thearda.com/ras/>).

Table 1, above, shows different correlations between indicators, representing secularization theory (Human Development Index, GDP per capita) and indicators of different dimensions of religiosity. Chart 1 concentrates on the macro-level relations between socio-economic modernization and attendance at church. Despite the deviations of a few countries, comparative analyses establish a fairly reliable negative relationship between core indica-

⁶For the measurement of religiosity, see the ideas expressed by Glock (1954).

tors of modernization and the social significance of religion (Norris and Inglehart 2004, 61-69; Li and Bond 2010). This relationship not only holds for people's affinity to the church or their obedience to religious norms.⁷ It also applies to their self-ascribed religiosity. This is based on the assumption that countries that are characterized by a higher degree of modernization have advanced further in their development trajectory than others. Therefore, countries differ with regard to the respective indicators of religiosity.

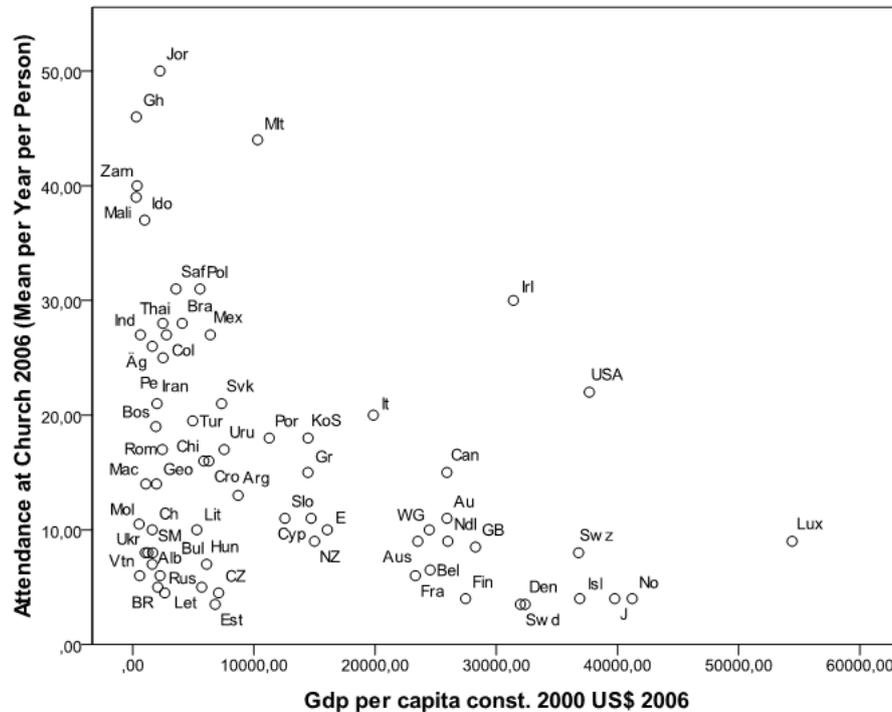


Chart 1: Relationship between socio-economic modernization and church attendance

Source: Own calculation on aggregate data; attendance at church from WVS 2005-08, EVS 2006-08, Afrobarometer 2006; GDP per capita 2006 from World Bank.

Negative relationships between levels of education (as an indicator of increasing rationality) or urbanization and religiosity are similar indications of this trend.⁸ These results are stable on the macro- and the micro-level. Just as people with a higher level of formal education tend to display lower levels of religious vitality, they are also more common in urban centres. Time-series analyses also usually indicate a drop in the significance of religion on different social levels (Aarts et al. 2008; Halman and Draulans 2006; Kelley and De Graaf 1997; Pickel 2009; Voas 2009).⁹ In contrast, indicators for the market model (regulation of religion, support of religion) have no significant impact on religious vitality. But political stability as an indicator of security and the Protestant cultural legacy correlate with all indicators of religious vitality. Political stability is connected to socio-economic modernization, but fit very well with the considerations of Norris and Inglehart (2004, 15), pointing out the relevance of human security for secularization. The Protestant cultural legacy shows the importance of cultural, societal and historical conditions.

To conclude, there is still empirical evidence of processes of secularization. Certainly, we may challenge the assumption that secularization processes are occurring on a global scale.

⁷The adherence to religious norms can be considered to reflect Chaves' (1994) call for analysis of secularization to focus on the cessation of the enforcement of religious authority.

⁸Based on EVS-data, Halman and Draulans (2006, 276) reach nearly identical conclusions.

⁹This includes, for example, the loss of influence on the political system, the separation of church and state, the erosion of church membership, the decrease in religious practices, as well as increasing religious indifference.

Based on the available data, it is still less easy to make out a trend in the opposite direction. Of course, secularization is not always a linear process and does not always occur within the same time periods. Voas (2008, 28) rightly noted that these developments are *non-linear*. They involve different starting points, as well as time leaps. Even wave motions may occur. At the same time, Voas stated that later empirical measurements display less and less religious persons compared to earlier time points (Voas 2009, 167; 2008, 40-41; Bruce 2011, 54-56). It is difficult to deny the relationship between modernization and secularization. According to the basic assumptions of comparative analysis, the relationship is impressive, while the outliers do not disqualify the general findings. Individual outliers simply require additional explanation. In these cases, other, equally valid explanatory factors are usually of greater importance than the influence of secularization, which causes the development trajectories or the resulting levels of religiosity to vary. In social sciences, one theory rarely explains everything.

Eastern Europe is a case in point. Here, the constellation of different influential factors has caused religious vitality to increase in some instances and to decrease in others (Müller 2009; Pollack 2008; Tomka 2010). It is the intensity of the processes, rather than the non-existence of the relationship between modernization and secularization, which is primarily responsible for these varying developments (Pickel 2009). In light of counteracting processes, it is sometimes difficult for secularization to become the focus. Especially in Eastern Europe, temporarily increasing levels of religious vitality frequently give the impression that there is no secularization. However, this is merely temporarily superimposed by other processes. Due to the fact that the impact of individual factors on religious vitality can change, this does not necessarily indicate a long-term trend.

Already today, Eastern European countries that are characterized by high socioeconomic success have begun to follow the Western European secularization trend. Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Poland are good examples of this development. Religious development in Eastern Europe will probably follow a parabolic curve, which will converge with secularization effects depending on the socioeconomic success and the time period since the transformation of the political system—at least as long as other factors (which will be addressed later in this paper) do not impede it.¹⁰

Secularization, therefore, is a complex process. As it is embedded in highly diverse analytical settings of social, as well as political, change, it may evoke a number of different effects on the social, as well as the individual, level. In the long run, secularization seems to succeed and produces more and more religious indifference (Voas 2009, 167). Religious indifference is not necessarily specifically atheism or areligiosity, but can be a general diminishing in the social significance of religion.

IS SECULARIZATION THEORY NOW DEAD? COUNTER CRITIQUE

Ad 1: False Assumption of Universal Secularization

The assumption that processes of secularization are universal as well as irreversible, as stated in early versions of the theory, is indeed problematic. Apparently, secularization is neither linear, nor irreversible, nor uniform in kind and rate. However, in the current debate secularization theorists hardly ever propagate such a rigid version of secularization theory (Bruce 2011; Voas 2008). Socio-cultural processes—including secularization in the current multi-dimensional sense—cannot be thought of as independent of their context. The very idea of a context-independent, steady process of secularization, for which some critics reproach secularization theory, seems absurd. Besides the manifold effects of modernization, it is necessary

¹⁰ The specific level of religiosity in Eastern Europe is strongly connected to the history of socialism. The anti-religious effect persists because of the durability of values acquired from socialization. Therefore, the impact of modernization is underestimated, depending from this historical legacy. This explains the lack of exact correspondence with the secularization theory position of the Eastern European countries as shown in Chart 1.

to take into account the political (church-state relationship; political repression of religion; see initially Martin 1978) as well as the cultural context (historical embeddedness of religion; religious monopoly or religious pluralism; denominational legacy; McLeod 2000) in order to explain religious vitality. Despite all differences, it is the advance of modernization and secularization that are mainly responsible for long-term development.

Ad 2: Lack of Empirical Evidence

In global comparison, the empirical evidence substantiates secularization theory's assumptions, rather than the relationships suggested by alternative explanatory models. In particular, the religious market model can only establish itself to a limited extent based on systematic international comparisons¹¹ (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Voas 2008, 45-47). Since the debate is mainly aimed at North America and apparently identifies Europe as a special case (Davie 1994), this seems to suggest a paradigm change. In addition, individual cases and deviations from the universal hypothesis (a higher degree of modernization causes a higher level of secularization, or lower religious vitality) are taken as evidence against the entire theory. Additional explanations on the part of secularization theory are hardly endorsed.¹² Such conduct does not really help the debate on secularization. If anything, when considering the data, it is the proponents of the current version of the religious market model who have to examine its empirical evidence—more so than the proponents of secularization theory (for example, Voas 2008, 25-27 and Norris and Inglehart 2004, 229-231). By means of the results of comparative empirical analyses at hand, it is possible to reject Hadden's (1987, 608) fundamental criticism of the lack of an empirical foundation. It almost seems as if the critics' reproach of ideological secularism can be reinterpreted in terms of a request for *ideological anti-secularism*.

The declaration of Europe as a special case also hardly seems sufficient to disprove secularization theory. The same criticism applies to the critics of secularization theory as they focus on North America (Finke and Stark 2006). To put it polemically, the proponents of the market model actually have far fewer empirical cases compared to the cases available to secularization theorists in Europe alone. This does not imply that secularization theory is entirely right. The simplified version—that is, the assumption of a modernization-induced linear and irreversible secularization—is no longer adequate either. It is therefore necessary to take into account additional explanatory factors in a multi-causal explanatory model. This includes processes of identity composition; the relationship between religion and the nationhood; the revitalizing effect of religious conflict on religiosity; and aspects derived from individualization theory and the religious market model (Stolz 2009). Contrary developments do indeed cause secularization's possible development trajectories to vary.¹³ It seems particularly helpful to identify countries as well as regions that deviate from the universal assumption and to discover development trajectories that vary in rate. This in turn requires that we start out from secularization theory's universal assumptions in order to be able to distinguish the meaningfulness of the deviations and variations.

¹¹ Systematic international comparisons are those that abide by the rules of comparative analysis. This particularly pertains to the issue of case selection. For example, the results presented by the advocates of the religious market model (Iannaccone 1992) are partly conditioned by the selective choice of countries included in the analysis.

¹² This is remarkable, especially with respect to the religious market model, as researchers frequently add additional explanations and modify the basic model when their empirical results are not in line with the basic assumptions (Froese and Pfaff 2005).

¹³ This is open to debate; it will have to remain unsettled at this point whether this is an example of "multiple secularities" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchard 2011) or development trajectories that strongly deviate from the main trajectory as described by modernization theory.

Ad 3: Religiosity as an Anthropological Constant

Over the past decades, one of the main debates in the sociology of religion has been the dispute over the *concept* of religion. This raises the question of whether the focus on a functional (or anthropological) concept of religion actually reflects the immunization strategy that secularization theory is frequently accused of pursuing. It is categorically assumed that individuals *have* to become religious owing to the need to cope with contingency. Consequently, religion may change, but will never disappear. This either leads to the conclusion that secularization theory is wrong by definition (Luckmann 1967), or that it should be limited to institutional differentiation on the social level (Chaves 1994). In my opinion, such a specification reflects a rather ideological point of view. Interestingly, this is what the “new atheists” are currently criticized for. For a start, shouldn’t we believe those who consider themselves to be non-religious, even if their statements are affected by their cultural experience? Doesn’t it impede the epistemologically impartial perception of social development when we safeguard religiosity’s continued existence from changes by anticipating its eternal existence?

To me, it seems almost arrogant to assume that we know better than the respondents who make statements regarding their religiosity. It seems more sensible to consider the different dimensions of secularization and religiosity separately and to allow for the possibility of a pluralisation or transformation of both religion and religiosity. This in turn provides the ability to confirm or falsify both *empirically*. At the same time, secularization theory must use its methods to facilitate the adequate measurement of alternative forms of religiosity in order to stand a chance of depicting religious pluralisation and individualization fairly, since it is very likely that secularization and religious pluralisation are occurring simultaneously. This indicates processes of individualization of religion. Therefore, religious transformation leads to the parallel existence of those who do not believe and those whose religiousness differs one from that of others (Dobbelaere 2002, 137-155). According to Voas (2009), it is likely that the number of religiously indifferent persons will increase. He refers to the resulting intermediate stage as a kind of “fuzzy fidelity” (166-167). In the long run, however, Voas and Dobbelaere consider individualization to be an intermediate stage on the way to far-ranging secularization. This also applies to the societal level, which has frequently been neglected in past years. Not only do new religious movements evolve on this level, the organizational form of classical established religious groups also changes. Network-based relationships between persons with a similar kind of religiosity increasingly replace traditional participation in large organizations.

Ad 4: No Golden Age of Faith?

It is not as easy to refute the criticism of secularization theory’s assumption of a Golden Age of Faith. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to validly test this historical assumption empirically. It is likely that religion used to be of greater relevance as an interpretive system in pre-modern times. However, it seems that secularity also existed one way or another during that time. Bearing in mind that the proof of pre-modern secularity also poses a problem for the critics, the question is whether it is indeed necessary to *embed* the current debate on secularization historically to such a great extent. While running the risk of exposing the argument to (partly legitimate) historically informed criticism, it is necessary to consider whether the current debate on secularization could be limited to modern times. While multi-dimensional secularization, as is currently being analyzed, attains long-term significance by referring to historical processes¹⁴, the gain in detailed (sociological) explanatory power regarding the current development of religiosity and secularity remains limited. We must not ignore the fact that the core of secularization theory, as well as the social scientific debate on secularization, is mainly concerned with the relationship between modernization and religion’s loss of social significance in modern times.

¹⁴ See also McLeod’s (2000) outstanding systematic reconstructions.

The relationship between these two fields is mainly justified in terms of processes of rationalization and functional differentiation. However, these processes resulted from the age of enlightenment and industrialization; that is, phenomena which took place in the late 19th century. While it is of course interesting to study these phenomena, emphasizing pre-modern changes of the religious may distort the focus on the relationship between modernization and secularization, which we mainly study today. Perhaps we can only apply the current version of secularization theory as an explanatory approach when taking into account the relevant socio-structural and socio-cultural conditions and limiting its temporal scope to the respective time periods. In doing so, counter-evidence in terms of low levels of religious vitality in former times would be less of a thorn in the flesh of secularization theory.

We can hone this argument further. It is possible that modernization needs to reach a certain threshold in order for the process of secularization to become effective, which is the only thing that is of interest as regards secularization theory. The evidence at hand of the relationship between socio-economic modernization and the social significance of religion discloses such an effect once socio-economic modernization reaches a level that is exclusively achievable in modern times (post-1945). At this point, it might be more straightforward to consider secularization theory as a modern construct whose claim to theoretical as well as empirical significance is also restricted to this time period. However, this should be discussed further.

Ad 5: Current Public Relevance

Religion's remaining impact in the public realm can hardly be denied (Casanova 1994), but does talking about religion in the public realm indicate its social significance? How far can public debates on individual topics be construed as a resurgence of religion? Leaving aside the fact that it is impossible to determine whether the public significance of religion is greater, lesser or the same for lack of an empirical benchmark, it is possible to make a provocative assertion concerning the limited meaningfulness of the public discourse regarding the social significance of religion. Talking about religion is not the same as religious vitality. The same applies to the interest in religious topics. Neither is this the same as religiosity.

However, fundamentalism and religious-based conflicts are visible. But is this a completely new phenomenon? Surely not, I would say. The rising debate of fundamentalism and "dangerous religions" seems more a public debate, spread by the worldwide media. Using Huntington's (1996) term, "clash of civilizations", sells newspapers, but the empirical evidence is mixed. Fox (2004) points out an effect of religion as a "push factor" for originally ethnic conflicts, Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000) had a lot of doubts of there being a systematic religious effect on conflict. Of course, it is possible to justify the opposite position as well. The political relevance of these processes is based on actual communal processes that may indeed constitute developments beyond secularization. Identity-building processes especially may result in processes that run counter to secularization. This does not imply that secularization theory is wrong in principle, especially when considering its diverse dimensions. As for future analyses, it is undoubtedly sensible to integrate the dimension of the public significance of religion into one of the existing differentiations between social significance of religion and individual religiosity.

SECULARIZATION AS A PROCESS WITH VARIOUS TRAJECTORIES, DEPENDENT ON CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

It seems useful to add two additional arguments to these responses to the criticism. Firstly, it is important to point out a misconception regarding the term "secularization". Secularization theory usually describes a *process* not a certain *state*; *secularization is not the same as sec-*

ularity.¹⁵ Therefore, the analyses focus on the development towards the diminishing social significance of religion and do not seek to identify “secular societies”. These hardly exist at present. Only China, Vietnam and possibly the former East Germany approximate such a pattern. However, no-one would describe Ireland or Poland as secular. Nevertheless, over the past decades, processes of secularization have undoubtedly been recorded in both countries. Consequently, the kind of criticism that declares secularization theory to be obsolete owing to the lack of a discernable extinction of religion and religiosity fail to convince. In addition, the critics have extremely high expectations of the theory. It is hardly fair to ascribe the expectation of a drastic change from religiosity to secularity over a time period of barely 100 years to secularization theory.

Statistical findings in descriptions of the status quo of religiosity frequently seem to disprove secularization theory; secularization processes are neither always linear, nor do they have a continuous effect on religious vitality. However, just as these findings provide limited information on processes, they also withhold a variety of simultaneously operating additional influential factors. Secularization may take place in wave motions or leaps. Comparative analyses of the state of secularity or religiosity therefore derive from a number of developments, including the process of secularization. Of course, this complicates the determination of secularization processes. However, it is unquestionably realistic. The context is of especially great importance. In his early writings, Martin (1978) had already highlighted the impact of different contextual factors on religious development. However, in contrast to Martin’s (2005) later conclusions, these results do not undermine secularization theory. Instead, they call for contextualization and a multi-causal perspective. Just as secularization may take on many different forms and dimensions, a number of different factors may have partly related or unrelated effects on the social significance of religion. Basically, the different predictors coexist. Altogether, they determine the degree of religious vitality on the macro-level. These include the political context, cultural historical legacies, identity processes or the interaction between religiosity and nationality.¹⁶

Especially historically evolved contextual factors can have a profound effect on the trajectories, which are nevertheless to be evaluated as processes of secularization. Not only do they differ in the extent of their effects depending on the region, they may even contradict one another. This is the case in Eastern Europe (Pickel 2009, 112-113), as explained above. In this region, the revitalization of religion in the course of the cessation of political repression of the church and religion is confronted with accelerated modernization processes: temporal dynamic developments may call forth different kinds of non-linear developments. Both the timing of the commencement of the secularization processes, as well as their rate and trajectory, may vary across countries. In Eastern Europe, the evolution of religious vitality (and secularization) presumably describes a parabolic curve as a result of the moderation of certain effects over time. If socio-economic modernization continues, religious revitalization is likely to diminish and the declining trend of the number of people with repudiating attitudes towards religion (acquired in the course of processes of socialization) will probably slow down. In that case, previously concealed secularization will come to the fore again.

The hypothesis of a *path-dependent* development continues to assume a universally negative relationship between modernization and the social significance of religion. This need not necessarily be expressed in terms of an observable increase in secularity if the effect of alternative developments is more pronounced. This applies to different processes as well contextual changes. Firstly, inherent in modernization and the closely coupled process of globalization

¹⁵These insights were derived from ideas that evolved during discussions at the University of Leipzig. For more information, see the project on “multiple secularities” by Wohlrab-Sahr at the University of Leipzig (http://www.multiple-secularities.de/publikationen_de.html).

¹⁶Identity-building processes are particularly important in this respect. Hardly any other socio-structural aspect determines the development of group identities as strongly as religion.

is a counterinductive process. In many instances, religious revitalization movements reflect a reaction to the diffusion of Western secular values. This is where in particular those cultural arguments that refer to a lack of culture-specific applicability of the model of secularity come into effect.¹⁷ They are frequently related to identity-building and identity-securing processes. Apparently, they are the strongest opposing factors to secularization. These processes also occur when people seek security in times of radical social change. This is exactly the kind of identity-securing process that Bruce (2002, 31-34) outlines when he describes the effects of “cultural defense” or “cultural transition”. It is important to note that identity-building processes do not invalidate secularization theory’s explanatory approach, they merely highlight more forceful processes besides the assumed explanations. Also, with regard to group processes in civil society, identity building is crucial, as in the case of the *social capital* approach (Putnam 2000), for example. It also indicates that it is possible to develop different kinds of religious organizations.

CONCLUSION – THE CALL FOR A CONTEXTUALIZED AND MULTI-CAUSAL SECULARIZATION THEORY

In summary, the thoughts outlined above show that secularization theory has a lot to offer the sociology of religion. Its *universal basic assumption* is a good starting point from which to structure the thoughts on the relationship between religion and society. It remains to be seen to what extent we are dealing with a “neo-secularization paradigm”, but secularization seems to be “a useful and meaningful analytical construct” (Yamane 1997, 109, 120), which is helpful in analyzing the development of the various kinds of religious belief. This is also supported by the fact that alternative “new paradigms” (Warner 1993) contain new problems. In addition, they frequently lack empirical evidence outside a certain cultural context. Today, this fact that used to hold against secularization theory (Hadden 1987, 600) applies more strongly to the competitors than to modified secularization theory itself.

Secularization theory and its assumptions are neither without fault, nor are they the only valid explanations for the results of empirical analyses. Evidently, processes of modernization and secularization are not the only processes that affect individuals and societies. In the end, there is always a conglomeration of different contextual influences on religious vitality in countries, regions and individuals. Historical developments are of great importance in this respect. They determine the cultural context within which religious vitality, secularity or secularization take shape. They lead to path-dependent secularization and religious vitality. The task of comparative sociology of religion is to decode them in their diversity. It is not so much of interest to study whether secularity already existed in pre-modern times, but rather which kinds of effects the current socio-cultural context that resulted from the historical developments has on religious vitality (or secularity). Consequently, not only is it possible that different constellations of religious cultures or “multiple religious vitalities” exist, it is also very likely that they do so in light of changing social structures. At the same time, these developments are neither coincidental, nor unpredictable. They can very well be traced to certain general explanatory factors.

It is important, therefore, that secularization theory be complemented, not simply rejected.¹⁸ Thoughts derived from the market model should serve as practical additions to the different strands of secularization theory. However, they neither suffice as a substitute or new paradigm, nor is it sufficient to immunize individual religiosity as an anthropological constant, as in the case of the individualization thesis of religion. Most likely, processes of individualization and pluralisation accompany processes of religious secularization. Certainly, secularization theory

¹⁷ It is less the modernization in the respective regions than a defensive attitude evoked by the diffusion of Western values, ideas and models that leads to a vitalization of religion.

¹⁸ It remains open to debate how far it is helpful to broaden the conceptualization of differentiation and to focus on the transformation of the religious, as suggested by Yamane (1997).

has little explanatory power when it is perceived as a uniform approach (as it is by most of the fundamental critics), whose validation exclusively depends on a constant “decrease” in religious vitality, while the level of modernization increases, without taking into account additional social circumstances and the change of social institutions (Wilson 1998, 64). However, when we accept the fact that there are a variety of reasons for and a number of paths to secularization, as well as contextual factors, which may even lead to more religious vitality in the end, the theory provides a tool for the broad analysis of processes in the sociology of religion.

What is important is to elaborate their composition *empirically*. This is where we need to start out from in order to further develop secularization theory and to deal with secularization and competing theories in the sociology of religion. Only keen analyses of reality enable researchers to make progress at the theoretical level. This particularly pertains to the inclusion of comparative analyses. Most statements on secularization are located on the macro-level. Accordingly, this is where they need to be tested. In order to be able to make more far-reaching statements (which are more appropriate to the theory), it is necessary to have more to show than selective studies of countries and sets of countries. At the same time, researchers must not neglect the interactions between macro-level structures and individuals if they seek to determine the causal mechanisms. Timing, the duration, counter-movements, interactions, and developments that are differentiated according to different levels are of particular interest in this respect.

If researchers seek this goal, then a multi-dimensional contextualized consideration of processes of secularization that goes beyond inefficient discussions of paradigms will promote scientific insights. This decidedly includes a synthesis of current conclusive explanations and theories. In that case, secularization theory represents an ideal type guideline that provides support when analyzing religious and secular heterogeneity, while permitting the conscious and empirically well-founded inference of variations in the world.

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