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Varieties of Secularization Theories and Their Indispensable Core

Detlef Pollack

In the social sciences, a new discourse on religion in modern societies has established itself. It is no longer the master narrative that religion is waning in significance that dominates the perspectives in the social sciences. The new key words are “deprivatization of the religious” (José Casanova), “return of the gods” (Friedrich Wilhelm Graf), “re-enchantment of the world” (Ulrich Beck)—or, quite simply, desecularization (Peter L. Berger). Insights of the sociological classics into the strained relationship between religion and modernity are regarded as no longer valid. Instead of speaking of the decline of religion in modern societies, of a strict contrast between modernity and tradition, scholars nowadays emphasize the blurring boundaries between tradition and modernity and the resurgence of religion in modern societies. Obviously, the logic of reversal governs this new way of thinking: Criticizing the secularization theory has become a new master narrative itself and often has a great deal to do with scaremongering. That’s why what is required first is as precise a reconstruction as possible of what secularization theory is actually saying. The article in its first part provides a reconstruction of the propositional content of secularization theory. The second step will then be to elaborate the various meanings of the concept of secularization. The third part finally deals with the criticisms of secularization theory and discusses the extent to which they are justified or not.

Keywords: causal mechanisms, modernity, religion, secularization, social differentiation

Originally the main form of interpretation used in the sociology of religion for describing and explaining religious change in the modern era, secularization theory has now come in for criticism. It is no longer the theory of the decline in importance of religion or even its total demise in modern societies that dominates the discourse in the social sciences. The key phrases used to describe the current processes of religious change are rather “deprivatization of the religious” (Entprivatisierung des Religiösen; Casanova, “Public Religions”), “return of the gods” (Rückkehr der Götter; Graf, *Die Wiederkehr*), “re-enchantment of the world” (Wiederverzauberung der Welt; Beck)—or, quite simply, desecularization (Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*).

Not only is it therefore possible to claim that religion in modern societies has acquired a new public countenance and is increasingly instrumental in influencing people's actions, but the criticism of secularization theory is also accompanied by the assumption that religion and modernity are compatible, that religion may have a strong influence on current processes of change, and that modern ideas and institutions are themselves religious in origin. Religion has ceased to be regarded as a dependent variable exposed only in a reactive sense to the processes of rationalization, urbanization, increased prosperity, and the expansion of education in the modern age, but it is now seen rather as a dynamic factor not only capable of initiating social, political, and economic change, but also one that is subject to change itself. If religion in modern societies is capable of performing significant social, political, and economic functions, the sharp division assumed by secularization theory between the premodern and modern eras becomes questionable. Is the significant role played by religion in the age of modernity so basically different from the position it previously occupied? Is it not the case that the influence of religious values, ideas, and identities on social institutions and individual patterns of behavior in premodern cultures has been exaggerated out of all proportion by secularization theory?

The criticism of secularization theory recently formulated is therefore aimed not only at the claim that religion is losing its significance in the modern age but also at a variety of related assumptions—for example, of the unavoidable tension between religion and modernity, of the socially dependent status of religious practices, convictions, and ideas in the modern age, and even of the stark contrast between tradition and modernity. The sharpest criticism of secularization theory is grounded in the statement that modernism inevitably leads to the marginalization of the religious, or at least to its privatization. It is the deterministic, teleological, and evolutionistic character of secularization theory that repeatedly powers the criticism of that theory and has invited the reproach of automatism, one-dimensional thinking, a trusting belief in progress, and Euro-centrism.

Clearly, the criticism of secularization theory—as, incidentally, the theory itself—brings with it a huge number of underdetermined assumptions and unilateral value judgments that make it difficult to do it justice. Criticism of secularization theory often has a great deal to do with scaremongering, so what is required initially is as precise a reconstruction as possible of what secularization theory is actually saying. Any analysis of secularization theory needs to be preceded by the precise reconstruction of its propositional content. The second step will then be to elaborate the various meanings of the concept of secularization as well as the positions adopted by secularization theory. The third part, the conclusion, deals with the criticism of secularization theory and discusses the extent to which it is justified or not.

1. THE CONTENT OF SECULARIZATION THEORY

So what does secularization theory actually say? Secularization theory assumes that the processes of modernization have an ultimately negative effect on the significance of religion in society and its acceptance. To capture the core statements of secularization theory, it is not enough to put together the assumptions that are propounded by many or perhaps even most advocates of the theory. On the contrary, what is necessary is to single out the

statements that are of themselves indispensable to secularization theory. The core thesis of secularization theory does not reside in the assumption that the differentiation of society is to be made responsible for the marginalization of the religious in the modern era, as is frequently assumed (Casanova, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority” 19f.; Tschannen 404; Yamane 115; Gorski 141f.; Dobbelaere, “Assessing Secularization Theory” 231).¹ Even if differentiation theory is often put forward by those advocates of the theory of secularization, it is still just one approach among many that are used to explain the decline in the significance of religion in the modern age, and, as such, it is not a necessary component of secularization theory. This is accompanied by attempts to attribute secularization to processes of rationalization—for example, the emergence of a scientific view of the world, improvements in economic performance, the reduction of existential insecurity, or cultural tendencies toward pluralization.² It is a matter of controversy whether modernization is to be understood as an expression of social differentiation (Casanova, *Public Religions*; Dobbelaere, *Secularization*; Dobbelaere, “Assessing Secularization Theory”) or as the consequence of economic growth (Norris and Inglehart), as a form of social rationalization (Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*) or mainly as a cultural phenomenon (for example, as the result of cultural pluralization and individualization; Beck, *Der eigene Gott*), or even as the knock-on effect of the tension between cultural utopias and institutional limitations (Eisenstadt), and this certainly is how these differences are regarded in the various approaches. The advocates of secularization theory are in agreement only in that modernization, whatever its interpretation, has secularizing effects.

Nor does secularization theory claim that modernization leads inevitably to secularization, and that the decline in the significance of religion in modern societies follows a single, irreversible, and teleological path.³ In fact, as Karl Gabriel (“Jenseits von Säkularisierung”) rightly asserts, “today nobody actually assumes any more that with secularization a process has been scientifically identified that is necessarily, deliberately and inevitably heading for an end of religion” (11).⁴ As Wallis and Bruce, two proponents of secularization theory,

¹Like Casanova (*Public Religions*), Tschannen, and Yamane, Philip Gorski (“Historicizing the Secularization Debate” 141f.) also regards differentiation theory as being the core of secularization theory that is surrounded by a “protective belt” of various theses such as the thesis of the disappearance, the decline, the privatization, and the transformation of religion.

²So, for example, the approach to the theory of secularization adopted by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart does not use the functional differentiation of society as a means of explaining the decline in the significance of religion in modern societies, but rather the increase in the standard of economic prosperity and the concomitant improvement in existential security.

³This has been elaborated by Goldstein, who reproaches Warner (see Warner 1052) and Stark (see Stark 241) for having wrongly interpreted secularization theory with their claim that it follows a linear development from the sacral to the profane. Only a few secularization theories, according to Goldstein (158), follow a linear paradigm. Many expressly rejected a theory of this kind. Most of them followed other paradigms that were either cyclical, dialectical, or paradoxical in nature.

⁴At any rate in the works of David Voas (“The Continuing Secular Transition” 43; Voas and Döbler), a tendency can be observed of treating the decline in the significance of the religious in the modern era as being more or less irreversible. This tendency, however, stems not from theoretically founded decisions but from empirical observations. Bruce has also recently inclined to this view (*Secularization* 54–56).

stated in 1992, “Nothing in the social world is irreversible or inevitable” (27). Norris and Inglehart—two more key proponents of secularization theory⁵—want their argumentation in terms of modernization theory to be understood as “probabilistic, not deterministic (16)”. They observe that: “Through modernization, we believe that rising levels of security become increasingly likely to occur. But these changes are not mechanical or deterministic” (17). The claim that modernization has a negative effect on the attractiveness of religious communities, practices, and ideas does not describe a norm that will acquire worldwide acceptance, or a telos toward which this development is inevitably heading, but a hypothesis that needs to be subjected to empirical scrutiny. Secularization theory is therefore open to empirical correction. If, however, it is sensitive to deviations and variations, it is still true that, although there is no deterministic relationship between modernization and secularization, there is still presumably a high probabilistic correlation. “Nothing is inevitable, but some outcomes seem more probable than others” (Voas 42f.).

Nor is there any way in which today’s secularization theory tries to impose a normative evaluation of religious change.⁶ As Hermann Lübbe (23ff.) has shown, secularization was for a long time a polemical concept that was able to assume emancipative or even delegitimizing meaning. To this day, secularization has been dogged by reproaches of programmatic excess and an ideological bias. In the current debate, however, the crucial lines of conflict do not follow the boundaries of ideology or denomination (Müller 24). On the contrary, if evaluations creep into analyses based on secularization theory, then the image is often reversed. Advocates of secularization theory such as Bryan Wilson, or David Martin in some of his works, or also the early Peter L. Berger, have tended to regret rather than celebrate the decline in the significance of religion in modern societies (cf. Bruce, *Religion and Modernization* 2); theologians such as Friedrich Gogarten or even Pope Benedict XVI (2011), on the other hand, tend to use the term *secularization* in a positive sense. An enlightened optimism, which was not untypical of some earlier versions of secularization theory, can scarcely be found today (otherwise, Casanova, “Secularization” 13787; Schieder 47; Gorski and Altinordu 60).

Ultimately, secularization theory does not use as its starting point the disappearance of religion in the modern age (cf. Parsons, *Action Theory* 240; Wilson, “The Secularisation Thesis” 48f.; Bruce, *God Is Dead* 41; Norris and Inglehart 4), as its critics repeatedly claim (Stark and Bainbridge 430; Stark and Finke 58; Joas, “Führt Modernisierung zu Säkularisierung?”; Knoblauch, “Die populäre Religion” 3). The theory of its demise can

He rejects the criticism by Stark and Finke that the theory of secularization is a “theory of inevitable decline” (33) but considers a return of secularization as being out of the question as long as the modern individual is part of a culture in which individuals are able to choose their religion autonomously.

⁵Further proponents are Karel Dobbelaere (“Towards an Integrated Perspective”; *Secularization*), Steve Bruce (*Religion and Modernization*; “Religion in the Modern World”; *God Is Dead*), Frank Lechner, David Voas, and Gert Pickel. Important impulses come from the early work of Peter L. Berger.

⁶As James Beckford claims, however, “secularization had never amounted to a testable theory but had simply been a taken-for-granted ideological reflex of antagonism towards religion and rationalist assumptions about modernity” (32). Beckford is referring to Hadden, who argues that secularization theory could have been accepted uncritically only in a cultural milieu characterized by the spirit of the Enlightenment, the theory of evolution, and faith in science (Hadden 595).

be found in the nineteenth century (for example, with Comte, who assumed that religion is meant to be replaced by science), and in the 1960s (for example, in a textbook by Anthony F. C. Wallace that is repeatedly cited by those who reject secularization theory (cf. Stark and Iannaccone; Stark and Finke). Nowadays, however, singular thinkers such as Marcel Gauchet may be regarded as representatives of the theory of the demise of religion, and even Gauchet expects in the personal spheres the survival of a form of traditional religion that “perhaps will never disappear” (4).

What secularization theory claims, therefore, is twofold.⁷ In the first place, it assumes that the social significance of religion in modern societies is weakening in comparison to earlier epochs (empirical–historical description) (cf. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* 14).⁸ This claim does not preclude the notion that there are opposing developments and exceptions, and that the process of weakening is a roundabout one, ambivalent and paradoxical. What is necessarily implied in secularization theory, however, is that premodern cultures attach greater importance to church and religion than modern ones. Therefore, despite all empirically justifiable modification, secularization theory makes a differentiation in terms of time by negatively delimiting modern epochs from earlier ones and relating to them at the same time. This approach inevitably gives rise to questions of periodization and the demarcation of modern and premodern periods in time. Second, secularization theory assumes that the decline in the importance of religion can be attributed to processes of modernization (explanatory core). This is not to deny that there are other factors involved in religious change and religion itself can also actively influence this change (as already claimed by Parsons, “Christianity

⁷There have been repeated attempts to determine the core of secularization theory. According to Tschannen, secularization theory consists of three core elements: differentiation, rationalization, worldliness (407–12). Müller reduces their number to two: differentiation and rationalization (15). As already mentioned, Gorski and Casanova assumed that differentiation forms the essential core. The problem of these attempts at a definition consists, as already mentioned, in the fact that they concentrate on statements propounded by many, but not all, representatives of secularization theory and therefore do not endeavor to work out the details of those assumptions that are simply essential to secularization theory.

⁸To argue that secularization is synonymous with the loss of importance of religion and to define it as a “category relating purely to the observer” with the help of which “religious observers describe their position in a social form characterized by functional differentiation,” as Benjamin Ziemann (9f.) does, means disputing the necessarily implied claim of an objectively historical development and implies that the concept be made dependent on the inside perspective of the religious members. In Luhmann, whom Ziemann invokes, the idea can be found that religion interprets as secularization its own claim to validity raised to an improbable level if it experiences this as the indifference of an environment that deviates from its own (Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* 227f.). Even according to Luhmann (*Funktion der Religion* 105f., 227, 259f.), the formation of an intrasocietal environment that can no longer be construed from a religious point of view is the consequence of objectively occurring processes of functional differentiation. The concept of secularization is therefore not couched purely in terms of its relationship with the observer, even in Luhmann. The inner-religious observation of secularization would be a mere fiction if it bore no relation to empirically verifiable changes in the position of religion in the social environment. The later Luhmann also regards secularization not only in relation to the observer (Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* 283) but also as a consequence of “functional differentiation by relinquishing the control of other systems to the latter” (315).

and Modern Industrial Society” 55ff.). Secularization theory inevitably brings with it the assumption that modernization is the most significant factor that influences religious change in present-day societies, and that religion is ultimately negatively affected by it. In this respect, it treats religion, for the most part, as an independent variable.

2. VARIOUS TERMS AND CONCEPTS RELATING TO SECULARIZATION

In canon law, the term *secularization* initially meant that a monk would leave his monastery and make the transition from belonging to a monastic order to becoming a secular priest. During the Reformation and in the nineteenth century (Principal Decree of the Imperial Deputation—*Reichsdeputationshauptschluß*—of 1803), this term was also used, however, to refer to the expropriation of ecclesiastical property and its transformation to a worldly possession (Lübbe 23–33). In both cases, the requirement that a process of secularization actually exists can be found in the distinction between a religious and a secular sphere. The difference between the religious and secular spheres needs to be separated in the medieval view of the world from the difference made between this world and the hereafter, the human world and the Kingdom of God. If the term *secularization* is used to describe the transition from the religious to the secular sphere, it concerns in this case only a change in this world. The differentiation between this world and the hereafter, on the other hand, is not affected by this. If the church belongs to this world as well as the hereafter, and mediates between the two by means of the sacrament and is at the same time a part of both the religious and the secular sphere, it raises the question with the transition from one sphere to the other as to whether it is possible to maintain still the distinction between these two spheres and whether religious salvation and religious perfection cannot also be found in this world. If the separation of the religious and the secular sphere is lost, this opens up the question of the place that the church and religion may occupy in the secular world. Not without reason does José Casanova (“Secularization” 13787) describe the question of the location of religion in the secular world as the analytic task of secularization theory.

Meanwhile, the concept of secularization has divested itself of its canonical significance and has not gained in clarity in the process (on the controversial and confusing debate, see Lübbe 1965; Ruh; Conze, Strätz, and Zabel; Tschannen; Bruce, *Religion and Modernization*; Casanova, *Public Religions*; Asad; Lehmann; Joas, “Führt Modernisierung zu Säkularisierung?”; Taylor). It is now applied to processes of change in cultural history of, in part, global historical proportions. Possibly associated with its canonical origin, however, is the fact that it is used in both a legitimizing and a delegitimizing sense and is employed both to describe a history of emancipation and a history of deprivation. Furthermore, there is a need to distinguish between a genealogical and a quantifying manner of use. What is meant by the genealogical term is the transformation of the semantic content of a term from a theological to a secular context, as, for example, the postulate of the political equality of all citizens before the law is interpreted as a secularization of the idea of all persons before God (Jellinek) or the idea of progress in history as a transformation of the idea of a providentially directed history of salvation (Löwith). With the use of the term in the quantitative sense, what is meant is the shift in that part of meaning that religion is capable of occupying in societies. Even if there may be a connection between the genealogically qualitative and the

descriptively quantitative use of the concept of secularization, the two approaches still mean different things. In the first case, the main issue is the question of the religious roots of secular phenomena and, consequently, the question of the extent to which theological meanings are still consonant with theological meanings in secular ideas and practices; in the second case, on the other hand, the question is how the significance of the religious has changed in society. As distinct from philosophy and the historical sciences, the last mentioned term has asserted itself in the social sciences. It is also founded on what are currently the most influential approaches to secularization theory—those of Bryan Wilson, Steve Bruce, Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, and Niklas Luhmann.

Bryan Wilson (*Religion in a Sociological Perspective*) regards the processes of *social differentiation*, of *societalization*, and of *rationalization* as the major reasons for the losses in the position of religion. *Social differentiation* means that religion is losing its decisive influence on other social segments such as economics, science, the family, or medicine, and these segments are functionally acquiring increasing autonomy in their emancipation from the supremacy of religion. *Societalization* means the gradual dissolution of forms of living communities from which religion draws much of its social strength, and its increasing replacement by supra-collective, impersonal organizations and institutions. *Rationalization* means, finally, that social goals, be they political, scientific, economic, medical, or educational, become increasingly isolated, and the means for achieving these goals are improved. On the other hand, the achievement of religious aims, since they relate to the supernatural, can be rationalized by efforts to rationalize them only in a limited way (*Religion in a Sociological Perspective* 44).

The analyses by Steve Bruce (*God Is Dead*; “What the Secularization Paradigm Really Says”) focus mainly on the influence of the growth in *religious pluralism* and *egalitarian individualism*. On account of the growth in religious pluralism, the nations that are committed to egalitarian principles regard themselves as being compelled to withdraw their support for individual religious communities and to secularize their central institutions—for example, their schools. At the same time, religion in societies with a plurality of religions loses the regular everyday acceptance it enjoys from being embedded in day-to-day life in culturally homogenous societies.⁹ Moreover, according to Bruce, under the conditions of religious pluralism, the dogmatically sectarian system of belief is gradually replaced by a liberal, tolerant, and ecumenical form of faith. Whoever thinks that their children are threatened by eternal damnation if they do not subscribe to one single truth will do everything possible to bring them up in the faith. Believers with a liberal attitude who consider that there is more than one way to the truth, and that children should find their own way to God, will invest less in their children’s religious upbringing (“What the Secularization Paradigm Really Says” 42). Therefore, even if they remain true to the faith themselves, it is quite likely that they will recruit fewer children for the faith than would be needed to keep the membership of their religious community stable.

Then again, Niklas Luhmann suspects that the problem of what religion relates to resides in the simultaneity of the determinable and indeterminable that is inevitably inherent in any form of meaningful selection. Religion “has for the social system the function to

⁹Before Bruce, this argument was broadly developed by Peter L. Berger.

transform the indeterminable world, because it is outwardly (environment) and inwardly (system) interminable, into one that can be determined” (*Funktion der Religion* 26) and hence to render acceptable “the in itself contingent selectivity of social structures and worldly designs” (“Die Organisierbarkeit” 250f.; 2000: 47, 303). In this respect, religion fulfills its function by means of codification—in other words, it substitutes the determinable for the indeterminable and, in doing so, conceals it. Whereas nonreligious selections of sense necessarily point to other possibilities that can be criticized and negated at any time, religious sense forms absorb all attempts to go beyond the limits, thus making invisible all efforts to determine a purpose and to form structures, even their own.

Luhmann claims that, with the conversion of society from stratification to functional differentiation that accompanies the emergence of modern society, the function of religion comes under pressure to adapt. With functional independence, religion also has increased opportunities of “increased selectivity, particularity and functional specialization” (*Funktion der Religion* 247). Functionally differentiated societies in particular should be able to find highly developed religious answers that are “not contaminated by secondary economic, political, familial or scientific considerations.” Processes of functional differentiation are interpreted by Luhmann, however, as being mainly the social–structural cause of secularization (*Funktion der Religion* 228). At the *personal level*, the consequence of functional differentiation lies in the privatization of religious decision. Faith and involvement in church life can no longer be expected to be fundamentally motivated by a general consensus (*Funktion der Religion* 239). They become rather a matter of individual decision. At the *social level*, functional differentiation results in a change in the form of social integration (242). In functionally differentiated societies, there is a decrease in the need for, and the possibility of, selections that are binding on society in its entirety (79f.). The structures and forms of meanings behind the religious system are no longer covered by social isomorphism and can then no longer function as an expression of society’s overall ability to integrate them (248). At the *cognitive worldview level*, functional differentiation ultimately means that, on account of the increase in society’s ability to dissolve and recombine, the horizons of what can be ascertained are extended further and further, and what seems ever more unlikely is drawn into the worldview. Religious forms of contingency absorption created by the occlusion of the indeterminate may, under conditions of great secular complexity and open reference structures, become less and less plausible and increasingly inadequate in terms of complexity (253ff.). Thus, even if the contingencies of modern societies may perhaps constantly produce a need for religion, this gives rise to the problem of whether religion is possible at all under modern conditions (*Funktion der Religion* 8; *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* 301).

For Norris and Inglehart, the significance that religion has in society is determined mainly by the *feeling of existential security* and its vulnerability through physical, social, and personal risks. They claim that, in societies that are more exposed to existential risks, the need for religion is greater than in societies where there is a greater level of existential security. Existential security means, on the one hand, freedom from natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, droughts, and tornados, and, on the other, freedom from socially created risks and dangers such as war, human-rights violations, poverty, and social inequality. To the extent to which societies secure peace, gain access to adequate food supplies, improve their health care system, guarantee increases in income, reduce social inequalities, and install a

social safety net, the level of perceived existential security increases, whereas the need for religious values, systems, and practices declines.

According to Norris and Inglehart, however, the social significance of religion depends not only on the economic development of a society; the cultural heritage of religious traditions exerts an influence, as religious traditions leave a profound impression in their respective societies. The social effectiveness of religions is therefore path-dependent and, as such, not only economically but also culturally determined.

3. DISCUSSION OF CRITICISM OF SECULARIZATION THEORY

The objections to secularization theory have gained considerably in importance in the discussions in the fields of social science and history in recent years. Of these objections, the most important is the reproach that the historical depth of the field has been largely neglected. As a matter of fact, historical analyses do not assume any position of great importance in more recent approaches to secularization theory. With Peter L. Berger, of course, we do find historical observations that go back as far as ancient Judaism; with Steve Bruce, reference to the influence of the Reformation on the formation of a religious pluralism; and, with David Martin, analyses of the various historical constellations that influence religious change (Center–Periphery, Church–State). Franz Höllinger even posits the historically based theory that the weakening of religious convictions and practices in present-day Europe can be attributed to a significant extent to Christian missionary activity carried out from on high and not infrequently with the use of force, and to the close interrelationship between political rule and the church and the resultant alienation of the church from the needs of the people. The demand for a historicization of secularization theory, as made by Philip Gorski (“Historicizing the Secularization Debate”), is by and large justified. Of course, it is precisely David Martin’s approach that also reveals the specific difficulties of a historical specification of secularization theory, as, in view of the number of historical constellations and factors to be considered, Martin scarcely arrives at any statements that are capable of generalization.

There is a concomitant objection to secularization theory that concerns the question of the scope of its validity in terms of time and its periodization (McLeod, “Introduction” 5ff.; Lehmann 107ff.). Do processes of secularization begin with the age of industrialization or in the Enlightenment, during the Reformation or already during the Renaissance or even during the Investiture Controversy in the Middle Ages? This question frequently remains unclarified in the approaches to secularization theory and correlates with the other question—namely, of whether secularization theories do not tend to assume that there was a premodern period of standardized religious culture and of the capability of the church to integrate that precedes the period of religious decay in the modern era, and to invest this with assumptions of homogeneity (Brown, “A Revisionist Approach” 38; Stark and Finke 63ff.; Joas, *Glaub und Moral* 36ff.; Graf, “Euro-Gott im starken Plural?” 239). Are the proponents of secularization theory constructing the myth of a “Golden Age of Faith” that does not stand up to historical scrutiny? Historical studies show that, in premodern cultures, church attendance by the masses left a good deal to be desired (Murray 92–94), that the number of available churches in the country was much too low to take care of the rural population in religious terms (Morris), that the clergy was poorly educated, with many priests scarcely capable of anything more

than the Ave Maria (Duffy 88), and that religious apathy and alienation characterized the bulk of the population (Stark and Finke 67).

The sharper the scrutiny of cultural differences in the premodern age, the more questionable do clear caesuras seem between the modern and the premodern period, and the more likely does it seem that the beginning of the process of secularization needs to be transferred to a point further back in history or even to dispute a process of secularization at all and instead to speak of cycles of de-sacralization and re-sacralization, of undulations or even of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous and paradoxes (Steckel 174; Gabriel, “Das 19. Jahrhundert” 432; Blaschke 443ff.).¹⁰

It is difficult to deny, nevertheless, that the social significance of religion—for instance, in the world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—cannot be compared with that of today. At that time, religion was admitted to all social spheres, and, if it served to legitimize political dominion, it could give rise to the outbreak of wars; it was the foundation of all human knowledge and established the principles behind the dispensation of justice. In his impressive study “A Secular Age,” Charles Taylor (414f.) has shown how the attempts to penetrate and shape the whole of society spiritually already began in the eleventh century with the Hildebrand reforms and the renewal movement of the emerging monastic orders, which since that time sought to bridge the divide between the exigent religiosity of its clerics and the magically rooted popular piety of the masses, as well as obliging the population at large to observe the high standards of a theologically and ethically shaped form of Christianity. If, in the early modern period, it was almost out of the question not to believe in God, today belief in God has become one option among many.

One further objection that is still to be found at the descriptive level affects the concept of religion assumed in secularization theory. According to the criticism, secularization theory uses to a large extent as its base a limited definition of religion that reduces religion to the church and the system that is the church. To work with a broad concept of religion would mean having to state that there is a return of religion even for the highly modernized countries of Western Europe (Knoblauch, “Ganzheitliche Bewegungen”; Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion*; Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*; Polak). Religion, it is claimed, has not lost any significance in the countries of Western Europe, but only changed its forms. Today, it appears not so much in an institutionalized garb as in a more individualized and syncretistic shape, which is why it is to be found mainly outside its institutionalized social forms (Ebertz; Krech; Davie; Hervieu-Léger). The emergence of these new forms of non-institutionalized religiosity cannot be appropriately captured by means of a secularization theory that operates with a reductionist concept of religion (Harskamp; Kennedy; Knippenberg).

To be able to hold on to the central statements of secularization theory, some exponents of the theory maintain that it is possible to talk meaningfully of a loss of relevance of the religious only at the level of social institutions. Mark Chaves, for instance, would like to limit the term *secularization* to the decline in religious authority and divests himself of the idea that this process exercises a strong influence on individual belief. Similarly, Yamane also assumes that religion has not lost any significance for the individual in the course of

¹⁰Cf. Walsham (527f.). Other historians use the concept of undulation to capture the intended content: see Wolfgang Schieder (311) and Schilling (43).

modernization, but only for society. With this form of reductionism, secularization theorists are apparently responding to the remarkable finding that the belief in God and other religious concepts in societies defined as secular are still extremely widespread. To claim that secularization means only the “decline of religious authority” and has nothing to do with the individual’s religious awareness is strikingly similar to an immunization strategy that plays down the importance of religious feelings and ideas in order to save the secularization thesis. Stark and Finke have rightly called this revisionism “insincere” (60). If the intention is to speak meaningfully of a process of secularization, all dimensions of religion have to be covered: religious institutions, legitimization strategies, and socially binding interpretations of the world, publicly performed practices and rituals, as well as individual ideas, feelings, and experiences, and not only religious phenomena on the macro-sociological level. Otherwise, this would mean working with a limited concept of religion that reduces the religious to the institutional and equates religion with the church. Since Thomas Luckmann, this reductionist concept of religion, which owes its inspiration to the sociology of knowledge, has rightly been subjected to repeated criticism (Luckmann, “Neuere Schriften zur Religionssoziologie”; Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion*; 1 Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion* 17).

The central objection to secularization theory, however, is aimed not at the question of the extent to which it appropriately captures the processes of religious change in the modern age, and the conceptual and notional conditions it creates in the process, but at its explanatory core thesis, which is the claim that there is a highly probable correlation between modernization and secularization. What is controversial here is what factors actually lead to secularization. Is secularization driven mainly by processes of functional differentiation, increased prosperity, urbanization, and industrialization, or the dissolution of self-contained milieus based on social morals (cf. McLeod, *Piety and Poverty*; McLeod, *Religion and the People*; Gilbert, *Religion and Society*; Gilbert, *The Making*; Nipperdey)? Or are social-structural and economic factors not decisive, but cultural ones—for example, processes of cultural pluralization, improved education, the rationalization and scientification of the worldview, or the broadening of horizons and the opening up of new future prospects (see, for example, Hölscher, “Secularization and Urbanization”; Hölscher, *Geschichte der protestantischen Frömmigkeit*; Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*)? Or those of political organization, such as the creation of new legislative frameworks enabling various, also non-Christian, religious communities to act in terms of equality, the liberalization of the relationship of church and state, as well as the expansion of democratic possibilities for co-determination in the community? At the same time, there are clearly identifiable connections between the causal attributions and the chronological ordering of secularization processes: wherever greater significance is attributed to ideas and worlds of the imagination, the authors tend to put some historical distance between themselves and decisive changes, placing them at least into the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries or even further back; if, on the other hand, the emphasis is on changes in terms of economics or social structure, such as industrialization, urbanization and improvements in the welfare system, the authors place their key periods at a later date.

Then again, secularization theories are criticized because of their inability to specify the causal mechanisms through which the identified factors of change, whatever

they may be, influence the individual's religious behavior patterns and attitudes (Stoltz, "Secularization Theory"). What is the shape of the causal nexus that exists between explanatory factors located at the macro level, such as urbanization, mechanization, pluralization, or even democratization, and individual attitudes, practices, and experiences? If, for instance, as a result of modernization, processes of rationalization occur, this can lead to a situation where scientific means are used to criticize religious interpretations of life and the world, rational images of the world replace religious worldviews, and the acceptance of religious beliefs is forced out by information and education.

It is equally conceivable, however, that science and technology provide new forms of communication, information, and entertainment such as radio, television, cinema, the Internet, disco, or electronic games that do not constitute a direct attack on religion's claims to cognitive validity but hold out attractive alternatives to religious commitment and gradually undermine religious ties. There may be a conflict raging between religion and modernism, belief and knowledge, reason and revelation, but it is equally possible, as Steve Bruce (*God Is Dead* 23) assumes, that the blessings of the modern age simply make people weary of religious zeal: the more pleasant this life is, the more difficult it is to concentrate on what comes afterward.¹¹ At any event, it remains an open question as to what generative mechanisms are used when the consequences of modernism are transferred to individuals' behavior and world of experience.

The main objection raised, however, is that the probabilistic correlation claimed as existing between modernization and secularization does not stand up to empirical inspection. The example of the United States is repeatedly used as a particularly impressive case. The high level of religious vitality in the United States, which is undoubtedly one of the world's most advanced countries in terms of its economy, technology, and culture, is proof that a high degree of modernization and a high level of religiosity can certainly coexist (Finke and Stark; Warner; Joas, "Führt Modernisierung zu Säkularisierung?"; Knöbl 77; Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion* 17). This is also true of the processes of modernization and religious vitalization in the countries of Latin America (Casanova, "Secularization" 13790). The post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, which are catching up on the processes of modernization, have shown signs of above-average religious development (Greeley 93f.; Tomka, "Religious Change" 16; Tomka, "Comparing Countries" 56). Even for Western Europe, quite a few sociologists of religion have stated that there is a return to religion (Knoblauch, "Ganzheitliche Bewegungen"; Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion*; Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*; Polak, *Megatrend Religion?*).

¹¹Of course, this raises the question of whether, with the rise in the standard of living, the weakening of the feeling of existential insecurity assumed by Norris and Inglehart in fact leads to a reduction in the need for guarantees of religious security or whether the consequences of increased prosperity might not also amount to an aversion to materialist values and lead people to turn to post-materialistic spiritualistic values and consequently acquire a new openness to sensory needs beyond the direct material means of livelihood. This is also what Ingelhart assumes (Inglehart and Baker 41) although it does not quite square with the secularization theory he posits. Thus the implications of modernism for religion, however, are positive.

It is not only in the present, but also in the past, that sociologists and historians find facts that speak against the validity of secularization theory. For instance, the early phases of rapid industrialization and urbanization in the England of the nineteenth century were characterized by an increase in the number of those of a particular religious denomination with denominational affiliations in relation to the overall population (Brown, “A Revisionist Approach” 42f.).¹² According to surveys conducted by Lucian Hölscher (“Die Religion des Bürgers” 626), in some areas of Germany the dramatic drop in the number of those taking communion had already begun before the initial surges in industrialization and urbanization in the 1850s, whereas in the period after 1850, processes of urbanization went hand in hand with those of religious revitalization.¹³ In other words, modernization does not lead inevitably to secularization, and nor is the latter determined alone by the former.

Advocates of secularization theory, on the other hand, object that there is a clearly demonstrable negative correlation between modernization indicators and indexes of religiosity. This, so they claim, is valid worldwide (see, for example, Norris and Inglehart 58; Inglehart and Baker 49; Pettersson; Ruiter and van Tubergen), for Eastern Europe (Pollack, “Religious Change in Europe” 97), and also for Western Europe (Pollack “Religious Change in Europe” 96; Pollack and Pickel 155; Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen?* 93). Of course, modernization, they say, does not lead in every case to a weakening in the significance of the religious, and, of course, religious processes of change also have other causes than modernization. Even so, the probability of a correlation between modernization and secularization is very high. Also, if the sense relations, motives, and causal mechanisms used to explain this correlation have frequently not been expressly investigated, there are a number of plausible suggestions for determining them—for example, when Norris and Inglehart assume that the experience of inequality and uncertainty reinforces the need for a stable religious framework for interpreting the world, or when Hirsche shows that the increased availability of nonreligious consumer, entertainment, and service offerings associated with the increase in the gross national product leads to a decline in attendance at religious services.¹⁴ Just

¹²This statement refers to the decades after 1840. In the initial phase of the industrial revolution between 1750 and 1840, on the other hand, religious affiliation in England declined, which has most likely to do with the fact that the churches at this time were not in a position to respond appropriately to migration from the country into the towns by building churches and providing pastoral care (Brown, “A Revisionist Approach” 49).

¹³The extent to which this finding can be generalized is controversial, as data for the German Reich reveal fairly high numbers for those taking communion for 1880, and these do not fall significantly until the boom during the *Gründerzeit*, the years of rapid industrial expansion in Germany (Liedhegener, “Religion und Kirchen” 204), and in Bochum, a mining and industrial town, the transition from the agrarian to the industrial world was followed by a drastic decline in Protestant church membership, especially in the initial phase between 1840 and 1880 (Liedhegener, *Christentum und Urbanisierung* 553ff.).

¹⁴See also Stoltz (“A Silent Battle”), who sees the competition between religious and nonreligious offerings mainly as a causal mechanism.

as many critics of secularization theory write it off as being obsolete, some proponents of secularization theory fervently claim that they are not troubled by empirical counterevidence (Liedhegener, “Säkularisierung als Entkirchlichung” 482f.).

It is not only sociology but also more recent contemporary historical research that tends to be skeptical about secularization theory. The stronger focus by its representatives on the theme of religion was accompanied by criticism of the social history of the 1960s and 1970s, and the cultural turn that was beginning to take a hold in the 1980s. Their rejection of social history, which, on account of its approach to modernization theory, either did not make a theme of religion at all or only as a traditional element, explains their efforts to treat religion as a dynamic resource that is compatible with the functional principles of modernity and is even itself instrumental in shaping modernity (Balbier). Even so, their criticism of secularization theory follows conventional lines. It refers to its lack of historical specificity as a sociological master narrative that is unable to determine the historically specific forces driving religious change, as well as their use of quantitative methods that are not capable of capturing the highly individualized and hybrid social forms of the religious in the modern age (as an example: Großbölting and Große Kracht 340). Despite their criticism of secularization theory, recent approaches to contemporary historical research scarcely go beyond their fundamental statements. The Bochum Project on the analysis of religious change in the Federal Republic of Germany, which expressly avoids the term *secularization* as a label for this change and instead opts for the term *transformation*, comes to the conclusion that the history of religion in the Federal Republic offers a “wealth of illustrative material for a continuation of the tale of the decline of Christianity and especially of the churches in Europe and in Germany” and interprets the observed developments as a “scenario for their decline” (Damberg 30f.). Hugh McLeod (*Class and Religion; Religion and the People*), who, on the one hand, rejects the global hypotheses about the relationship between industrialization, urbanization, and increased prosperity as posited by secularization theory and the rejection of the church on the other, and refuses to accept that secularization theory has any explanatory power (*The Religious Crisis* 16), only then to single out “the impact of affluence” as the “most important” factor in the religious crisis of the 1960s. Peter van Rooden, who interprets religious change in the Netherlands and scarcely like any other dissociates himself polemically from secularization theory, can think of nothing else to explain the sudden onset of de-Christianization in his home country than to point to “the sudden growth in wealth and the emergence of a mass consumer society” (van Rooden 21). Despite its rhetorical demarcation, the writings of contemporary history are obviously tied up with the argumentative paradigms of secularization theory. In view of this fact, it would certainly be premature to bury secularization theory as contemporary historians such as Peter van Rooden or Callum Brown, as well as sociologists such as Rodney Stark, Ulrich Beck, or Hans Joas (“Führt Modernisierung zu Säkularisierung?”), propose. On the contrary, the approach taken by secularization theory still appears to have considerable descriptive and explanatory potential.

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