Is Secularization Global?

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Is secularization global? Yes and No. It depends what we mean by secularization.

If by secularization we mean the historical process of institutionalization of the modern secular spheres of science and technology, administrative citizen states, and market economies which function autonomously from religious institutions and norms, then secularization is indeed a global process and we all leave in a global secular age. Let us call this process “Secularization I”. If by secularization we mean, however, the decline of religious beliefs and practices which in most Western European societies has accompanied the historical process of secularization, then this process of religious decline, let's call it “Secularization II”, is not a global phenomenon. On the contrary, throughout many parts of the world “Secularization I” is not accompanied by religious decline but rather by religious growth and by different types of religious revival or transformations. Let me elaborate on these two propositions.

Almost a decade ago in Public Religion in the Modern World, I argued that in order to speak meaningfully of "secularization" we needed to distinguish three different connotations of the term, which have become entangled in European debates:

1. Secularization, as differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), from religion, usually understood as the “emancipation”, of the secular from ecclesiastical institutions and religious norms and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within a newly emerged religious sphere. In this respect both the religious and the secular are reciprocally and mutually constituted structures which first emerge with modernity.

2. Secularization, as decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, often postulated as a human universal developmental process. This is the most recent but by now the most widespread usage of the term in contemporary academic debates on secularization, although it remains still unregistered in the dictionaries of most European languages.
3. Secularization, as privatization of religion, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics. My book, Public Religions in the Modern World, put into question the empirical as well as the normative validity of the privatization thesis.

Maintaining this analytical distinction should allow to examine and to test the validity of each of the three propositions independently of each other and thus to refocus the often fruitless secularization debate into comparative historical analysis that could account for different patterns of secularization, in all three meanings of the term, across societies and civilizations. We could distinguish secular differentiation, religious decline, and religious privatization respectively as Secularization I, Secularization II, and Secularization III. But this already points precisely to problems in our definitions and in our categories.

Since in Europe the three processes of secular differentiation, religious decline and privatization have been historically interconnected, there has been the tendency to view all three processes as intrinsically interrelated components of a general teleological process of secularization and modernization, rather than as particular contingent developments. In the United States, by contrast, one finds a paradigmatic process of secular differentiation, which is not accompanied, however, either by a process of religious decline or by the confinement of religion to the private sphere. Processes of modernization and democratization in American society have often been accompanied by religious revivals and the wall of separation between church and state, though much stricter than the one erected in most European societies, does not imply the rigid separation of religion and politics.

I am going to leave aside the discussion of what I call the “deprivatization” of religion, which appears to be indeed a global phenomenon, in the sense that everywhere around the world we see all kinds of religious groups mobilizing politically or entering the public sphere to contest public norms. At the very least one must admit that today practically everywhere in the world “religion” has become a public contested issue. But in the following I am going to concentrate on “Secularization I” and “Secularization II” and on their contingent and diverse interrelations.

In a certain sense one could argue that both “Secularization I”, that is, the institutional differentiation of secular and religious spheres, and “Secularization II”, that is, the decline of religious beliefs and practices in the specific sense of the unchurching of the European populations, are unique Christian

European historical developments which cannot find exact replication practically anywhere else in the world.

Let’s look first at the differentiation of the secular and religious spheres. As Talal Asad has so eloquently argued both the modern categories of “religion” and “the secular”, have direct Christian theological genealogies. It was Augustine that introduced the Christian theological mutations into the older Latin terms, religio and sacrum. Building upon what Jan Assman has termed “the Mosaic distinction” between the transcendent creator God Yahweh and all false mundane idols, in De vera religione Augustine introduced the crucial axial distinction between the true transcendent Christian religion and Roman religious superstition, in the process challenging Varro’s tripartite division of religion into theologia naturalis, civilis, and mythica.

Varro himself had borrowed this distinction from the Greek differentiation of arcaic or pre-axial sacred reality into mythike (or the mythical world of the gods), phyloske (or the cosmic order of nature) and politike (the conventional noun of the democratic politi). Like the Mosaic distinction between the transcendent creator God and all creatures, the Greek differentiation also entailed a process of de-sacralization that undermined the pre-axial ontologically monist sacred-profane order.

But simultaneously, most likely in response to the problematic re-sacralization of the Constantinian imperial establishment, Augustine reformulated the neutral Latin term sacrum into a fateful Christian theological category. Originally, the Latin word sacrum, as in per sacra sacrum, only meant an indefinite period of time. But as first used by Augustine the “secular” referred to a temporal space between the present and the eschatological parousia in which both Christians and pagans could come together to pursue their common interests as a civil community.² In this respect the Christianian use of “secular” is at first very similar to the modern meaning of a secular political sphere, that of the constitutional democratic state and that of a democratic public sphere, which should be neutral with respect to all worldviews, religious as well as non-religious.

Such a conception does not equate the secular with the “profane”, as the other of the “sacred”, nor is the secular the other of the “religious”. It is precisely a neutral space that can be shared by all who live in a not religiously homogeneous or in a multicultural society, which by definition will have different and most likely competing conceptions of what is “sacred” and what is “profane.” This precisely was the situation in late Antiquity. Judeo-Christian monotheism had led to a de-sacralization or disenchantment of the pagan sacred. Consequently, the Christians’ refusal to sacrifice to “pagan” gods or to

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worship the divine emperor earned them the epithet of "atheists". The Christian sacred was the pagan profane and vice versa.

Eventually, however, with the consolidation of Western Medieval Christendom and the hegemonic triumph of the Christian church, the secular became one of the terms of a dyad, religious/secular, which served to structure the entire spatial and temporal reality of Medieval Christendom into a binary system of classification separating two worlds, the religious/spiritual-sacred world of salvation and the secular-temporal-profane world. The sacred-profane and the religious-secular binary systems of classification became superimposed and the secular became now equated with the earthly city while the religious became equated with the heavenly city. Thus, the distinction between the "religious" or regular clergy, who withdrew from the world into the monasteries to lead a life of Christian perfection, and the "secular" clergy who lived in the world along with the laity.

From a comparative axial perspective, the religious/secular dichotomy is a particular medieval Christian version of the fusion of the pre-axial system of classification of sacred and profane with the axial dichotomous classification of transcendent and mundane orders of reality. The modern Western process of "Secularization I" is a particular historical dynamic that only makes sense as a response and reaction to this particular medieval Latin Christian system of classification of reality between religious and secular and to the ecclesiastical claims of exclusive sacramental mediation between immanence and transcendence. But this particular Western Christian dynamic of secularization, which culminates into our secular age, has become globalized through processes of Western colonial expansion, which have entered however into dynamic tension with the many different ways in which other civilizations had drawn boundaries between "sacred" and "profane", "transcendent" and "mundane", and "religious" and "secular".

For that very reason, however, outside of Western Europe this process is not experienced as a process of internal institutional differentiation of the secular spheres from ecclesiastical control, but rather as the challenge of a Western colonial expansion that calls forth various forms of mobilization and transformation of traditional institutions and resources in order to face the Western challenge. Outside of the West, therefore, rather than viewing "Secularization I" as a process of secular differentiation it is more helpful to view it as a process of global expansion of what following Taylor may be called the modern secular immanent frame.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor has reconstructed the process through which the phenomenological experience of what he calls "the immanent frame", becomes constituted as an interlocking constellation of the modern differenti-ated cosmic, social and moral orders. All three orders, the cosmic, the social, and the moral are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence, and thus functioning *et tu Deus non daretur", "as if God would not exist". It is this phenomenological experience that, according to Taylor, constitutes our age paradigmatically as a secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs.

In a certain sense, not only the so-called "secular" societies of the West but the entire globe is becoming increasingly more secular and "disenchanted" in the sense that the cosmic order is increasingly defined by modern science and technology, the social order is increasingly defined by the interlocking of "democratic" citizen states, market economies, and mediatic public spheres, and the moral order is increasingly defined by the calculations of rights-bearing individual agents, claiming human dignity, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. All three orders are secular insofar as they are structured *et tu Deus non daretur*, that is, as if God would not exist. Yet, comparisons of secular Europe and religious America or the evidence of religious revivals around the world make clear that within the same secular immanent frame one can encounter very diverse religious dynamics. In other words, "Secularization I" is not necessarily accompanied by "Secularization II", that is by the drastic decline in religious beliefs and practices characteristic of most Western European societies, but is often accompanied by processes of religious growth.

Indeed, the fact that there are modern non-European societies, such as the United States or South Korea, that are fully secular in the sense that they function within the same immanent frame and yet their populations are also at the same time conspicuously religious, or the fact that the modernization of so many non-Western societies is accompanied by processes of religious revival, should put into question the premise that the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a quasi natural consequence of processes of modernization. If modernization per se does not produce necessarily the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, then we need a better explanation for the radical and widespread secularity one finds among the population of Western European societies.

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"Secularization II" is an unquestionable fact in Europe. But the explanation of this fact offered by the social sciences, and particularly by my own discipline the sociology of religion, is clearly unsatisfactory. European societies are "secular", in the sense of being "devoid of religion" not because they are modern. A global comparative perspective clearly shows that secularization in the sense of being "devoid of religion", does not happen automatically as a result of processes of modernization, but it needs to be mediated phenomenologically by some other particular historical experience. Self-sufficient secularity, that is, the absence of religion, has a better chance of becoming the normal taken-for-granted position if it is experienced not simply as an irreversibly naïve condition, as just a fact, but actually as the meaningful result of a quasi natural process of development. As Taylor has pointed out, modern unbelief is not simply a condition of absence of belief, nor merely indifference. It is a historical condition that requires the perfect tense, "a condition of 'having overcome' the irrationality of belief." Intrinsically to this phenomenological experience is a modern "statal consciousness", inherited from the Enlightenment, which understands this anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief as a process of maturation and growth, as a "coming of age" and as progressive emancipation.

I would like to propose that this secularist, statal consciousness is a crucial factor in the widespread secularization that has accompanied the modernization of Western European societies. Europeans tend to experience their own secularization, that is, the widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices among their midst as a natural consequence of their modernization. To be secular is not experienced as an existential or historical choice which modern individuals or modern societies make, but rather as a natural outcome of becoming modern. In this respect, the theory of secularization mediated through this historical statal consciousness tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is, in my view, the presence or absence of this secularist historical statal consciousness that explains when and where processes of modernization are accompanied by radical secularization. In places where such secularist historical statal consciousness is absent or less dominant, as in the United States or in most non-Western post-colonial societies, processes of modernization are unlikely to be accompanied by processes of religious decline. On the contrary, they may be accompanied by processes of religious growth.

The drastic decline in church attendance across Europe since the 1950's constitutes the strongest evidence for the defenders of the traditional theory of secularization. Less than 20 percent of the population in the majority of European countries attend church regularly, while in East Germany, Russia and in the Scandinavian countries the proportion of regular churchgoers decreases to the single digits. When compared with the very different evidence of continuing vitality in congregational, associational, religious life in the United States across all denominations – Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Muslim, and now Hindu and Buddhist –, it is obvious that this is the fundamental difference between American and European religiosity. Secularization in Europe takes primarily the form of "unchurching" (Ekkhedichte), which should be understood as a form of liberation from the type of territorialized confessional religiosity which was the legacy of the Westphalian system. European Christiannity, for all kinds of reasons, never made the full historical transition from territorial national churches (Landeskirchen) based on the territorial parish or Pfarrgemeinde, to competing denominations of civil society based on voluntary religious associations, a modern form of religious community.

The analytical distinction between "church" and "denomination" is the key to any comparative analysis of religious developments and patterns of secularization in Europe and the United States. Following Max Weber's definition, sociologically, a "church" is an ecclesiastical institution which claims the monopoly of the means of salvation over a territory. The territorialization of religion and the corresponding confessionalization of state, nation and peoples are the fundamental facts and formative principles of the Westphalian system of sovereign territorial states which emerged in early modern Europe out of the so-called Wars of Religion. The principle eius regis eius religiae is the general formative principle of such system, a principle moreover which was already well established before the wars of religion and even before the Protestant Reformation, as shown by the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain by the Catholic monarchs in order to establish a territorial Catholic state ruling over a homogeneously religious Catholic society. What the Peace of Westphalia represented was the generalization of this dual model of confessionalization of states, nations and peoples and territorialization of ecclesiastical religion among the emerging European territorial states. Every early modern European state (with the exception of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), was defined confessionally as Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Orthodox state. In this respect religious homogenization and in many instances ethno-religious cleansing stand at the very origin of the modern European state.

This is the fundamental factor of early modern European history which will determine the various patterns of European secularization. Comparatively speaking, European secularization can be best understood as a process of successive de-confessionalizations of state, nation and peoples, which was phenomenologically experienced as a process of liberation from confessional
identities. This is what determines the historically unique character of European secularization, which is now increasingly being recognized as a form of "European exceptionalism" rather than as a general model of modernization that is likely to be replicable elsewhere. In fact, the European pattern of secularization can hardly be replicated in other contexts in which there was no previous historical pattern of confessionalization of states, nations and peoples requiring their secularization, that is, their de-confessionalization.

Indeed, a comparison with the United States immediately points to radically different historical dynamics of secularization and religious growth. Historically, the United States is the first modern "secular" state, governed constitutionally by the dual clause of the First Amendment: "no establishment of religion" at the state level and "free exercise of religion" in society. From a comparative historical perspective, in contradistinction to European patterns, three factors are particularly significant.

In the first place, the new federal state was a new historical formation constituted through the federation of the thirteen British colonies, which did not need to undergo any process of de-confessionalization of the state or disestablishment of the church, since it had no previous history of confessionalization or church establishment as was the case in every early modern European state. In this respect, the so-called "wall of separation" between church and state is a misnomer insofar as the United States never has had a "church" in the strict sociological sense of an ecclesiastical institution that claims religious monopoly over a territory. It is true that some of the colonies had established churches, such as the Congregational Church in Massachusetts and Connecticut or the Anglican Church in the Southern colonies. But they were elitist minority institutions, comprising at most 20 percent of the population in each colony, and therefore they were not compulsory confessional churches encompassing the entire population in accordance with the Westphalian principle unum rogo uni religio.

Secondly, the "no establishment" clause expressing the secularity of the state was affirmed as a principle of "neutrality" towards each and all religions, abolishing therefore the canonical and juridical distinctions between "church" and "sect", as well as the one between "orthodox" and "heterodox" religion, that had been operative both within Western medieval Christendom and within the Westphalian system of European states. All religions, churches as well as sects, became now equal "denominations" before the law. A new term, "denominationalism", had to be invented to characterize the historically new American system of religious pluralism. "Denomination", a term which has no translation in any other European language, simply means the name which any religious group assumes as its own and by which they are recognized by other religious groups. Denominationalism is a system of mutual recognition of religious groups in society without state intervention. Religious denominations not only have no need or obligation to register or be licensed by the state, other than to obtain tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service, but the government itself has no right to ask or survey the religious denomination of its citizens. In this sense, there are no official religious statistics in the United States. No state agency, neither the Census nor the Immigration and Naturalization Service, can inquire about the religious affiliation of respondents in their surveys.

Thirdly, the so-called "wall of separation" protects not only the secular state from religion, but most importantly, and this is what is radically new in the American system, is meant to protect religion from state intervention. The principle of "free exercise of religion" expresses both a Protestant sectarian and highly individualistic conception of "religion" and a conception of religious freedom as "freedom from" state as well as church. The basic fact on the ground at the time of independence was the multiplicity of Protestant "sects" who had found refuge from religious persecution in "confessional" Europe. It was the sectarian principle of religion as a voluntary association, rather than the European model of a national confessional church, that became the model of religion in America for all religious denominations. The free exercise of religion in America denotes not only the unrestricted right to conversion, and thus the right to exit and enter any religious denomination as well as the right to proselytize, but it extends as far as the right of any individual to establish any new religion, to build any new religious community, or to start any new religious denomination without any state permit or registration. Eventually, all religions in America, churches as well as sects, Christian and non-Christian, irrespective of their origins, doctrinal claims and ecclesiastical-organizational identities will turn into congregational "denominations", formally equal and competing in a relatively free, pluralistic and voluntaristic religious system.

Moreover, unlike the old world of monopolistic churches and sedentary territorial parishes throughout Europe, the United States always offered a fertile ground for free-floating and unaffiliated expressions of individualistic and autonomous religiosity along with, and often also inside, an ever proliferating number of congregations, denominations and religious communities of all sorts which individual Americans could voluntarily join. Thomas Paine's expression "my mind is my church" or Thomas Jefferson's "I am a sect myself" may be viewed as paradigmatic "high culture" Enlightment expressions of individual religiosity. But historians of American religion have documented the widespread reception of all kinds of popular religion, and of paranormal, occult, spiritual and spirituslist practices that took place outside or on the
margins of organized religion, in what Jon Butler has aptly characterized as the "Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse." The widespread reception of Freemasonry and Mesmerism, of Swedenborgianism and Spiritualism, and the "occult" and "healing" connections which one finds at the origins of such typically "American" religious movements as Mormonism and Christian Science already presage the counter-cultural self-help and spiritual movements of the 1960's and the more recent counter-religious spirituality of the New Age.

Since the 1960's "American" religious pluralism has actually been expanding and incorporating all the world religions in the same way as it previously incorporated the religions of the old European immigrants. A complex process of mutual accommodation is taking place. Like Catholicism and Judaism before, other world religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism are being "Americanized" and in the process they are transforming American religion, while the religious diasporas in America are simultaneously serving as catalysts for the transformation of the old religions in their civilizations homes, in the same way as American Catholicism had an impact upon the transformation of world Catholicism and American Judaism has transformed world Judaism. The United States is bound to become "the first new global society" made up of all world religions and civilizations, at a time when religious civilizational identities are regaining prominence in the global stage.

Recapitulating we can say that in Europe "Secularization I" is accompanied by "Secularization II", that is, by unchurching, decline of religious beliefs and practices and conversion to non-religious secularity. In the United States, by contrast, "Secularization I" is accompanied by the dynamic pluralization of religious, spiritual and secular options. One of the most important tasks for comparative historical analysis in our global secular age is to understand the conditions under which in other non-European and non-Western contexts modernization and the expansion of the secular immanent frame is accompanied by a decline of traditional religion, as in Europe, or rather by religious transformations and the expansion of religious pluralism, as in the United States.

Quebec and Brazil

Let's look briefly at the similarly divergent dynamics of secularization or religious decline in Quebec and explosive dynamics of religious pluralism in contemporary Brazil. Quebec and Brazil happen to be two post-colonial and post-Catholic societies in the Americas which in the 1960s and 1970s underwent very profound processes of economic, political, and socio-cultural transformation that were accompanied however by very different and divergent dynamics of religious transformation.

In the 1950s both Quebec and Brazil could be said to be relatively homogeneous Catholic societies in which the Catholic Church maintained an official, state-protected religious quasi-monopoly and cultural hegemony. But as a consequence of the so-called "silent revolution" Quebec was transformed from being arguably the most religious region to being the most secular of society of North America. In one single generation practically the entire population of Quebec left the Church and what had been a homogeneously Catholic society became now a homogeneously secular one. The only unsettling factor in this dynamic of radical secularization has been the arrival of new immigrants from various regions of the globe bringing new dynamics of religious pluralism, making Quebec a more diverse and multicultural society, but one in which new immigrant religious minorities challenge the consensus of a homogeneous secular and post-Catholic Quebecois majority.

Brazil since the 1960s underwent a similarly radical socio-political transformation, yet unlike in Quebec the outcome of this process of modernization in the sphere of religion has been not "Secularization II", that is, the massive unchurching of the Catholic population, a drastic drop in religious beliefs and practices and a widespread conversion to a-religious secularity, but rather a process which following Taylor could be characterized as a supernova explosion of religious pluralism. Today Brazil is the global center of Catholicism, the global center of Pentecostalism, and the global center of Afro-American religions, each of these traditions manifesting internally a growing diversity and pluralism, while being caught simultaneously in competitive dynamics with one another, but making room as well for myriad expressions of immi-
grant religious communities from all over the world but also for novel forms of novel and exotic new religious movements, millenarian sects and cultic communities.

In sum, Quebec appears to have taken an European-like path of "Secularization I" accompanied by "Secularization II", while Brazil appears to have taken a path of religious and secular pluralization which is more akin to the model of the United States.

India and China

A comparative look at India and China, two old non-Western civilizations, very different from one another yet evincing in comparison to religiously homogeneous monotheistic Christian Europe very complex and diverse pluralistic and polytheistic religious fields also shows similarly divergent patterns accompanying processes of modernization. In both places the Chinese and Indian religious fields underwent very different and divergent dynamics of transformation as both civilizations were forced to confront and respond to the challenges of Western colonialism and of the accompanying global expansion of "Secularization I".

The emerging modernizing elites in India and China, for all kinds of reasons which we cannot explore here, became the carriers of radically different popular nationalist anti-colonial mobilizations. In the case of India the modernizing elites chose the path of using religion, religious groups and religious identities as a positive resource in anti-colonial modernization. In the process all forms of traditional Indian religion, and most especially what became now constituted as Hinduism, underwent a significant modern transformation in such a way that religion in India became positively associated with the anti-colonial struggle, with the new nation and with the formation of the post-colonial state. As a consequence, modernization in India was not accompanied by a decline of traditional religion, that is, by "Secularization II", but rather by religious transformation, religious growth and the increasing pluralization of an already diverse religious field. Religion in India today is not simply a traditional residue which has somehow survived the onslaught of modernization but is rather a novel product of this modernization.

In China, by contrast, the modernizing elites from the final days of the imperial regime through the early Republican, Nationalist, and Communist successive regimes all shared similar anti-religious strategies and forced secularization from above. To varying degrees all the Chinese modernizing elites shared the assumption and often the fanatic conviction that traditional Chinese religion in all its forms was the main cause of Chinese backwardness and a main culprit of the Chinese humiliation by Western colonial powers and that therefore in order to be able to confront successfully the challenge of Western imperialism and to gain autonomy and independence and to advance the modernization of the Chinese nation it was necessary to forsake, suppress and if necessary forcefully repress all forms of traditional Chinese religious culture.

Thus, the project of building a modern Chinese nation entailed aggressive secularization from above. "Smash temples, build schools" remained a permanent slogan of all Chinese modernization campaigns throughout the 20th century, culminating in the most radical and utopian project of the Cultural revolution in the 1960s to eradicate completely religion from Chinese society and from the Chinese people.

Yet the project ultimately failed and today as the modernization of Chinese society proceeds at an unprecedented fast pace, one can witness a truly astounding revival of all forms of religion in China and an explosion of religious pluralization: Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist, Muslim and Christian along with all kinds of new religious movements.

One could even point to similar divergent trends of religious homogenization and religious pluralization within majoritarian Muslim societies, looking for instance comparatively at Indonesia and Malaysia, Turkey and Iran, and Senegal and northern Nigeria.

In conclusion, it should be obvious that the divergent secular and religious trends that I have sketched in Western Europe and the United States, in Quebec and Brazil, in China and India, and one could extend this comparative analysis to other parts of the world, including post-Soviet Eastern Europe, as shown by the divergent trends in Ukraine and Russia, present very different challenges and opportunities for Catholic mission. Both dynamics, the dynamic of secularization and the dynamic of religious pluralism present significantly different challenges for Christian and specifically for Catholic mission.