The Karel Dobbelaere lecture: Divergent global roads to secularization and religious pluralism

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Abstract
This article analyzes the two divergent, though intertwined, roads of European secularization and global religious pluralism. In continental Western Europe, modernization and urbanization were accompanied by drastic secularization with limited religious pluralism. By contrast, in much of the rest of the world, in the Americas, North and South, throughout Asia and the Pacific and in Sub-Saharan Africa, modernization and urbanization have led to religious pluralism with limited secularization. In our contemporary global secular age, the parallel religious and secular dynamics are becoming ever more intertwined and interrelated.

Keywords
colonial encounters, confessionalization, globalization, modernity, religious pluralism, secularization

Résumé
Cette article présente une analyse de deux voies divergentes, bien qu’entrelacées, de la sécularisation européenne et du pluralisme religieux mondial. En Europe occidentale continentale, la modernisation et l’urbanisation se sont accompagnées d’une sécularisation drastique avec un pluralisme religieux limité. En revanche, dans la majeure partie du monde, dans les Amériques, au Nord et au Sud, dans toute l’Asie, au Pacifique et en Afrique subsaharienne, la modernisation et l’urbanisation ont conduit au

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pluralisme religieux avec une sécularisation limitée. Dans notre époque laïque mondiale contemporaine, les dynamiques religieuses et séculières parallèles sont de plus en plus étroitement liées et interdépendantes.

**Mots-clés**
confessionnalisation, modernité, mondialisation, pluralisme religieux, rencontres coloniales, sécularisation

It is a great pleasure and an honor to have the opportunity to deliver this lecture, named after Karel Dobbelaere, a great sociologist of religion, a great theorist of secularization, and a great teacher for all of us who became sociologists of religion and entered the field of secularization studies after him. I am therefore deeply grateful to Jörg Stolz, ISSR President, for the kind invitation to deliver this lecture at the ISSR Meeting in Lausanne.

Sociology was born as a theory of European modernity and to a large extent still remains anchored in these origins. A theory of modernity which, moreover, is grounded in a dichotomous binary distinction between tradition and modernity, implicit temporally as a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ in world history. Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft is the best-known set of such related binary terms. It stands not just for a dichotomous analytical distinction between two types of social formation. It actually denotes a processual conception of history in which ‘modernization’ signifies a world-historical movement from ‘traditional’ Gemeinschaft to ‘modern’ Gesellschaft.

The theory of secularization has been to a large extent just a subfield of the general theory of modernization. Within the theory of secularization, traditional ‘religion’ and modern ‘secularity’ function as an analogous binary set of dichotomous processual world-historical terms. Secularization signifies a world historical movement from ‘traditional’ religion to modern ‘secularity’. A world historical movement which, moreover, is not only empirically verifiable by the overwhelming collection of evidence and all kinds of data from European history from the Middle Ages to the present, but actually the historical movement of secularization, like the historical movement of modernization, is also conceived as a teleological process. It is this teleological nature of the process that makes it predictable, so that the theory of secularization from the start has assumed that, as other non-European societies modernize, they will also undergo a similar process of secularization.

In some of the most radical theories of secularization, such as the one developed by Bryan Wilson, the structure of the theory, besides being an empirical reconstruction of European historical processes, also has an intrinsically logical character which assumes the form of a deductive syllogism: Religion is a traditional form of ‘community’; modern society has no room for traditional communities; ergo religion will tend to disappear in modern ‘societies’ (Wilson, 1966; 1985). In a statement which formulates paradigmatically Wilson’s theory of secularization to which he is clearly indented, Bryan S Turner writes:

In the transition from community (Gemeinschaft) to association (Gesellschaft), we have in Western capitalism lost our roots in a communal world of social attachments. Secularization in
this framework is the erosion of those strong communal bonds that wrapped individuals into meaningful social groups (Turner, 2011: 137; and Casanova, 2011b).

I must confess it has not been easy for me to free myself from the persuasive character of such syllogism, a syllogism moreover which I did not learn first while studying sociology, but one which I found most convincing already while studying theology almost 50 years ago in Innsbruck. For four years, from 1969 to 1973, I used to pass through Lausanne regularly while travelling by train from my home town of Zaragoza to Innsbruck. In fact, I learned to change trains at Lausanne’s main station rather than in Geneva in order to avoid having to cross Swiss customs by foot along with hundreds of Spanish immigrant Gastarbeiter on their way to Switzerland or Germany. But I never stepped out of the train station into the streets, so this is actually my first visit to the city of Lausanne.

In a way I have spent the last 25 years, since the publication of my book, *Public religions in the modern world* (1994), unlearning much of what I had learned in my previous 25 years as a sociologist of modernization and as a sociologist of secularization. It was not that easy to free myself from the deep ‘modernist’ and ‘secularist’ assumptions that I took for granted as a young European sociologist. In the autobiographical reflection, which appeared a few years ago in the journal *Religion and Society*, the title of my intellectual journey reads ‘From modernization, to secularization, to globalization’ (Casanova, 2011a).

It should be obvious I am not the only European sociologist of religion who had to undergo such a rethinking. Peter Berger’s cumulative revisions of his original theory of secularization are probably familiar to most sociologists of religion. I find Berger’s most recent revision, in *The many altars of modernity* (2014), the most interesting.1

Berger’s points of departure and perhaps the most important insight of his revised thesis is that ‘the new paradigm should be able to deal with two pluralisms – the co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses’ (Berger, 2014: ix). This is absolutely crucial. We need an argument which is able to account simultaneously for this dual form of modern pluralism: religious pluralism, on the one hand, that is, the emergence of a global system of religions (Beyer, 2006), which I call global denominationalism, and secular-religious pluralism, on the other, that is the emergence of differentiated but co-existing religious and secular spheres, both in social space and in the minds of individuals.

But in my view, Berger’s new paradigm is still too much embedded within a theory of Western modernization that views modernity itself as the carrier or catalysts of both types of pluralism: multi-religious pluralism and secular-religious pluralism. Countering Berger, I would argue that European modernity is certainly the carrier or catalyst of the second type of modern pluralism, the secular-religious one, but not of the first one, multi-religious pluralism. As the exceptional process of European secularization amply demonstrates, modernity per se does not contribute to religious pluralism. We need an additional factor or analytical framework to understand the emergence of a global system of religious pluralism, and this in my view has to be a theory of globalization, a globalization that both precedes Western secular modernity and continues in an accelerated and transformed manner after Western secular modernity.
In other words, global religious pluralization emerges before Western secular modernity in the early modern era of global interreligious encounters that accompanies the European colonial expansion and then religious pluralization becomes accelerated in our contemporary global age in such a way that it begins to transform in the process also the heartlands of European secularization.

We need a theory that is able to encompass the intertwined European roads of internal European secularization and of external global European colonial encounters with the religious other. It is the second road of external global European expansion that serves as catalyst for the formation of global religious pluralization. European modernity leads to secularization but not necessarily to religious pluralization. Globalization leads to religious pluralization but not necessarily to secularization. It is the intertwining of both processes that produces the combination of the two types of pluralism.

In order to emphasize the intertwining of the two European roads, the internal one of homogeneous confessionalization leading to religious decline and the external one of global colonial intercultural encounters with the religious ‘other’, leading to religious pluralism, I propose that we take 1492 as the symbolic date that marks the beginning of both processes. Unlike the symbolic date of 1500 proposed by Charles Taylor (2007) as a dividing line between the medieval world of religious enchantment and the modern world of secular disenchantment and pluralization of belief options, which is still framed within traditional paradigms of modernization, the date of 1492 serves to complicate both our narratives of Western modernity and our narratives of globalization.

On the one hand, 1492 marks the decision of the most ‘Catholic Kings’ to expel Jews and Muslims from Spain in order to create a religiously homogeneous realm. In this respect, it marks also the beginning of the European-wide process of early modern confessionalization of state, nation, and people based on the principle *cuius regio eius religio* that served to organize the Westphalian system of states throughout continental Europe.

On the other hand, as the date of the discovery of ‘the New World’, 1492 is also the symbolic marker of the beginning of the European global colonial expansion initiated by the Iberian monarchies. The Iberian colonial expansion, the Portuguese one into the East Indies and the Spanish one into the West Indies, made possible the connection of the Old World of Afro-Eurasia and the ‘discovered’ New World of the Americas, linking the East and West ‘Indies’, thus forming for the first time one truly global world in novel transatlantic and transpacific exchanges. In this respect, the early modern phase of globalization constitutes literally ‘the first globalization’, a form of proto-globalization that can rightly be distinguished from earlier ‘archaic’ and later ‘modern’ forms of globalization (Gunn, 2003; Bayly, 2002).

Moreover, early modern ‘reformed’ religion, whether Lutheran, Calvinist or Catholic, can hardly be understood as a ‘traditional’ form of religion. It was the outcome of a prolonged disciplinary process of confessionalization led by national churches under state sponsorship (Gorski, 2003). This disciplinary process created new types of religiously homogeneous societies throughout continental Europe, a homogeneously Protestant North, a homogeneously Catholic South and three bi-confessional societies in between, Holland, Germany and Switzerland, each characterized by their own patterns of internal territorial confessionalization, based on confessional ‘pillars’, *Landeskirchen* or cantons.
In trying to ascertain the relation between modernization, secularization and religious pluralization, it is important to stress the fact that, at least within Europe, the principle *cuius regio eius religio* remained practically unaltered through the transition from monarchic to national people’s sovereignty with the fall of the ancient regimes or even through the process of mass democratization in the early 20th century. Continental European societies remained until very recently religiously homogeneous societies and the only significant change has been that from belief to unbelief, that is, unchurching and an increase in secular-religious pluralism, but not in religious pluralism per se. All significant differences notwithstanding, European patterns of secularization share similar paths from homogeneous religion to homogeneous secularity without noticeable dynamics of religious pluralization, other than the more hidden dynamics of religious individuation which Thomas Luckmann (1967) characterized as ‘invisible religion’.

At the level of individual consciousness, moreover, Europeans usually experience this process of de-confessionalization and the accompanying individuation as a process of temporal liberation from ascribed confessional identities. Phenomenologically, Europeans tend to experience secularization not so much as a process of spatial differentiation within their consciousness of coexisting religious and secular modes, which, according to Berger (2014), would correlate with the differentiation of religious and secular spheres in society. Rather, Europeans tend to experience secularization as a historical process of religious decline, that is, of temporal and spatial supersession of the religious by the secular.

This is the secularist moment of a philosophical conception of history tied to the Enlightenment critique of religion that understands the secular as a post-religious temporal stage. The secular is what comes ‘after religion’. As Taylor (2007) has shown convincingly, intrinsic to this phenomenological experience is a modern ‘stadial consciousness’, 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 (Casanova, 2010). It is the combination of the dynamics of de-confessionalization and this secularist stadial consciousness that in my view accounts best for the unique pattern of European secularization without pluralization. I am disregarding here the undoubtedly significant and diverse intra-European variations within the overall European pattern of secularization that I have analyzed in some of my other writings (Casanova, 2006; 2009; 2011c; 2014).

Outside of Europe, by contrast, in much of the rest of the world, both the dynamics of confessionalization and de-confessionalization as well as the secularist stadial consciousness are usually absent, although in Japan and China modernizing elites as well as the modernizing state developed strong secularist projects. What one finds more frequently is religious pluralization and religious-secular pluralism with milder secularization. To understand the dynamics of religious pluralization, processes of globalization and the ‘religious’ encounters linked to the external road of European colonial expansion are in my view more crucial than processes of modernization.

Analyzing the paradigmatic system of American religious pluralism, for instance, it is worth remembering that the American colonies became a refuge for all the religious minorities forced to migrate by the dynamics of ethno-religious cleansing connected with processes of European confessionalization. Besides being the home of Native
American cultures, they also became the home for African religions brought by the transatlantic slave trade. American developments, in this respect, stand at the crossroads of both dynamics, of external processes of globalization and of internal processes of modernization, insofar as the American Revolution is intrinsically connected with the European Enlightenment. In this respect, the United States remains the first and paradigmatic case of the simultaneous development of the two types of modern pluralism, religious-secular and multi-religious.

In order to analyze the formation of what I call the modern system of global religious denominationalism (Casanova, 2012), it would be necessary to go back to the early modern phase of global European colonial expansion and to follow the encounters between Catholic missionaries and non-Western peoples and cultures from 16th to the 18th century, before the expansion of global Protestant missions and before the consolidation of global Western colonial hegemony in the 19th century (Casanova, 2016).

From a global comparative perspective relevant is the fact that the religious-secular differentiation, which emerged first in Western Europe, has now become globalized. But this was not the result of processes of modern functional differentiation, associated with modernization, but rather the result of the European global colonial expansion and of the intercivilizational dynamics that developed between the West and the cultural and religious ‘other’. In fact, one could argue that even patterns of European secularization cannot be fully understood if one ignores the crucial significance that colonial imperial encounters had on European developments (van der Veer, 2001). In any case, any discussion of secularization as a global process should start with the reflexive observation, that one of the most important global trends is the globalization of the category of ‘religion’ itself and of the binary classification of reality, ‘religious/secular’, which it entails. While the social sciences, and particularly sociology, still function with a relatively unreflexive general category of religion, within the discipline of ‘religious studies’ the very category of religion has undergone numerous challenges, as well as all kinds of critical deconstructions (Asad, 1993; Beyer, 2006; Kippenberg, 2002; Mazusawa, 2005; de Vries, 2008).

Leaving aside the question that has dominated most theories of secularization, namely whether religious beliefs and practices are declining or growing as a general modern trend throughout the world, one can confidently claim that ‘religion’ has become an indisputable global social fact. That is to say, religion has become a discursive reality, both an abstract category as well as a system of classification of reality, used by modern individuals as well as by modern societies across the world, by religious as well as by secular authorities. Within the last decade numerous studies have appeared examining the discursive processes through which the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘the secular’ have emerged in non-Western cultures (Eggert and Hölscher, 2013; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011; Jun’ichi, 2014; van der Veer, 2014). The very fact that the same category of religion is being used globally across cultures and civilizations testifies to the global expansion of the modern secular-religious system of classification of reality that first emerged in the modern Christian West.

The paradox is that the globalization of the Western European secular-religious regime leads not to what Marcel Gauchet (1997) calls ‘the exit from religion’, as it happened in Europe, but rather, as in the United States, it leads to all kinds of novel religious transformations. Indeed, what characterizes the contemporary global moment
is not only the fact that all forms of human religion, past and present, from the most ‘primitive’ to the most ‘modern’ are available for individual and collective appropriation. Equally relevant is that fact that increasingly they must learn to coexist side by side in today’s global cities. This contemporary social fact tends to put into question all teleological schemes of religious rationalization and development which tended to place ‘primitive’ and ‘traditional’ forms of religion as older human cultural forms to be superseded by more modern, secular, and rational ones.

Certainly, one finds throughout the globe a tremendous variety of secular regimes of separation of religious and political authority as well as of state management of religion and religious pluralism, along with very different patterns of majority/minority relations that are mainly structured by different forms of nationalism and by different immigration regimes. Yet, the secular state management of religion is everywhere under siege, or at least in need of substantive revision, as it confronts everywhere the expansion of the principle of individual religious freedom, as well as increasing religious pluralization and new transnational religious dynamics linked to immigration and globalization.

As I have written elsewhere (Casanova, 2013), sociological theories of urban secularization were blinded by the European experience to ignore completely the significance of religious groups, religious movements and religious dynamics in modern processes of urbanization. This urban secularist blind spot is evident in the fact that even the Chicago school of urban studies, despite its ethnographic focus on immigrant and ethno-racial group dynamics, missed completely the religious dimension of these urban processes in Chicago or elsewhere in America. Yet it should be obvious that in the same way that one cannot seriously study the African American experience and its community dynamics without studying ‘the black church’ (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990), one cannot study practically any immigrant group in America without paying attention to its religious dynamics. This is true of older immigrant groups as well of most immigrant groups in America today (Casanova, 2007).

If one finds such fundamental transatlantic differences between Europe and the United States in otherwise similar and comparable processes of modernization, urbanization and secularization within the Christian West, the more one should expect differential dynamics that perhaps will tend to follow neither a European nor an American model, elsewhere.

A comparison of Quebec and Brazil, two post-confessional post-Catholic societies, illustrates the same dual divergent pattern. Up to the 1960s, Quebec had been a homogeneous confessional Catholic society, arguably the region with the highest levels of religious belief and practice not only in Canada but in all of North America. In one single generation, as a consequence of ‘the quiet revolution’, Quebec underwent a drastic process of secularization. Religious practice and affiliation plummeted and today Quebec is arguably the most secularized region of North America (Rocher, 2008; Meunnieur and Wilkins-Laflamme, 2011). A population which had been previously homogeneously Catholic had become in short order homogeneously secular and post-Catholic. As in Western Europe, the only dynamic of religious pluralism was brought in by the new immigrants.

Since the 1960s, Brazil has experienced its own quiet secular revolution. Brazil has also ceased being a confessional Catholic society. But de-confessionalization of state,
nation and population has not led to drastic homogeneous secularization but rather to an
explosion of religious pluralism of all kinds. Brazil remains the largest Catholic society
and a dynamic center of global Catholicism. But simultaneously it has become a dynamic
center of global Pentecostalism and a dynamic global center for the transformation of
Afro-American religions (Camurça, 2017). Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s global
cities, exhibit increasingly pluralist religious dynamics.

While Brazil may be an extreme case, one can observe similar processes of religious
pluralization throughout Latin America (Freston, 2007). Indeed, as the Pew Research
Report (2014) makes evident, in just a generation most Latin American societies have
been transformed from being homogeneously Catholic to being religiously pluralistic
with relatively mild secularization. While there are significant differences among Latin
American countries, the trends are uniform: a significant decline in the proportion
of Catholic affiliation, a significant increase in the proportion of Protestants or Evangélicos,
a milder increase in the proportion of ‘no religion’, and most significantly a recent
increase in the proportion of ‘other religions’. The fact that this religious pluralization
has taken place without noticeable violent conflicts between religious groups is a story
that deserves to be told in a global context where religion and religious pluralism are
often viewed as the primary source of violence.

Moreover, a global comparative look at post-colonial global cities throughout Asia,
Africa, and Latin America would seem to indicate that the ‘new world’ paradigm of
religious innovation and pluralization appears more adequate and fruitful than the old
European paradigm of secularization and religious decline. Indeed, the BRICS (Brazil,
Russia, India, China, South Africa), grouped until recently together as emergent socio-
economic powers, are all characterized by diverse patterns of religious pluralism (van

Asia has been for millennia a continent of religious pluralism or of multiple and
competing ‘teachings’ along with pervasive and diverse forms of folk religiosity. Asian
religious traditions are being radically transformed by processes of modernization and
globalization, but the overall trend appears to be that of increasing pluralization rather
than secularization and religious decline. Even the attempt of radical secularist regimes
to implement a drastic secularization from above, in China or in Vietnam, have obviously
failed (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). All religious traditions, old and new, appear to be
undergoing some kind of revival. South Korea, a country which was not subject to
Western colonialism, has become increasingly Christian in and through the process of
modernization. One can find today Korean Christian missionaries throughout Asia and
the Pacific.

Taking into consideration the theme of the 2017 ISSR meeting, ‘religion, cooperation
and conflict’, one could point out that it is easy to find similar patterns of confrontation,
collaboration and mutual influence of the religious and the secular, practically anywhere
in the world and in all religious traditions. The world of Islam would appear to be a
unique case, yet even within Islam, one finds a variety of religious/secular regimes with
patterns similar to those one finds in the West. Turkey, for instance, offers a model of
religious-secular confrontation akin to the French secular model. Morocco is characterized
by an evolving pattern of collaboration between ‘religion’ and ‘the state’ more akin to the
Nordic establishment model. Senegal and Indonesia offer models of a secular state with religious pluralization more akin to the American model.

In our contemporary global secular age, what were at first divergent roads to secularization and religious pluralism are becoming ever more intertwined. More societies are becoming simultaneously more religious and more secular, though in diverse ways. But everywhere the parallel religious and secular dynamics are becoming ever more intertwined and interrelated. I am not questioning the fact that a radical historical process of secularization, which amounts indeed to a ‘disenchantment of the world’, has taken place nor am I questioning the fact that we are living in *A secular age*. Following Taylor (2007), one can understand this process as the global expansion of the secular immanent frame.

In this respect, 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’ 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.

Paradoxically, with its institutionalization first in the West and with its ensuing globalization, the secular immanent frame becomes the very guarantor of the post-axial secular/religious system that guarantees the equal, non-hierarchic free exercise of religion to all forms of religion, pre-axial, axial and post-axial. The sacralization of human rights and the sacralization of the right of each and all individuals to religious freedom serves as the constitutive principle of such a post-axial global pluralist religious system (Casanova, 2015).

Yet, comparisons of religious America and secular Europe (Berger et al., 2008) or the evidence of religious revivals, religious conflicts and religious interventions in politics around the world make clear that within the same secular immanent frame one can encounter very diverse religious dynamics (Dieckhoff and Portier, 2017). Even continental Western Europe is being transformed by global migrations and most societies are becoming increasingly more religiously plural, while also being increasingly secular. In this respect, the disenchantment of the world does not entail necessarily the disenchantment of consciousness, the decline of religion or the end of magic. On the contrary, it is compatible with all forms of re-enchantment. Indeed, ecological survival may demand a certain re-enchantment of the earth as our living environment and life-world rather than as objectified nature.

**Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Notes**

1. It is also in my view his best book since the publication of his classics *The sacred canopy* (1967) and with Thomas Luckmann *The social construction of reality* (1966), precisely because in the new book he returns to his early Schützian phenomenological analysis.
References


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