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# Secularization and Beyond

**Valeriano Esteban Sánchez**

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# Secularization and Beyond

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### Abstract

*After the era of the great revolutions that inaugurated the modern age, European society reflected upon the social changes and role of religion in the new society principally through the concept of secularization. With the help of ethnocentric social sciences, the idea was reinforced and projected as the inevitable destiny toward which all of humanity would develop. This idea could be maintained for a certain time, but as it has been gradually discredited by the world outside of Europe, its central premise, that it is a natural process, has also been questioned. Projecting our particular experiences with religion on others is questionable. The relations between culture, ethnicity, politics and religion continue to flow. In light of the new situations arising from de facto multiculturalism, the tolerant values and practices of democratic secularism must be updated, beyond the reactive secularism that is sometimes used to disguise ethnocentrism.*

In the West the relation between culture, politics and religion has revolved around the theory and practice of laicism and secularism, sometimes in conflict, sometimes uncertain and never completely resolved. In any case, the Western secular movement in all its variations was always supported by a concept of religious change, secularization, which was strongly developed in sociology until it was virtually accepted without question. This fact alone is worth examining. Sociology is rife with debates between polarized positions, whether on inequality, the condition of modern society, methodology or even on the very nature of the discipline itself. This has often led it to be characterized as a multiparadigmatic discipline, in contrast to other natural and social sciences which tend more toward consensus. The 1970s was one of the most divisive periods for sociology, marked by a bitter confrontation between a defiant Marxist approach and a more complacent functionalist stance. Curiously, however, a notable convergence occurred in the area of sociology of religion around this same period. This convergence, which did not eliminate significant nuances here and there, was referred to as the “theory of secularization”. The theory had a clear central message: *as societies modernize, they become more secular*. In other words, there was a direct, observable and predictable relation between modernization and secularization.

There is no doubt that this idea penetrated the collective psyche of society as a whole. In fact, the consensus on the validity of this central idea was so widespread that even sociologists who were believers accepted it as true. *The Sacred Canopy*, written by the

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Austrian-born American sociologist Peter Berger, a Protestant, was a very influential book in this regard. In it, Berger sustained that secularization could not be reduced to a single cause, as it was a complex process that had been occurring over a long period of time. Echoing Weber, Berger argued that the roots of secularization were paradoxically religious. It all began with the process of religious simplification and rationalization in ancient Judaism, a religion characterized by a particular aversion to magic and correlative emphasis on monotheism, a single God upon which ultimate reality *depended exclusively*. This rationalizing impulse was later found in Protestantism, which eliminated rituals, sacraments and other mediating elements that were common in Catholicism. The Protestant Reformation notably accelerated the process of reducing the reach of the *sacred* and its institutions and decisively contributed to separating it from the *profane*.

It is worth noting that secularization is quite complex conceptually because over time layers of meaning have been added to it of which not everyone is aware. This has condemned the concept to permanent ambiguity and this lack of clarity often leads to misunderstandings, even among specialists. One of the first meanings that this term acquired is closely tied to a particular European experience: the separation and reduction of religious institutions. According to Berger, these processes, along with rationalist thinking, contributed to the rise of science, capitalism and industry, creating the conditions in which large segments of the population began to live without religion as an important part of their existence. Purely secular temporal structures began gaining ground, creating a truly autonomous space liberated from religion, which grew incessantly. Religion, which had been the overarching canopy guaranteeing social integration, covering all of society and imbuing it with meaning, could no longer serve this function. But while this was important, it was not everything.

The fragmentation of the Christian tradition after the Reformation represented a move toward religious pluralism. Faced with competition and the need to adapt to the modern world, religious authorities reacted by progressively implementing rationalized strategies that were focused on worldly concerns. Eventually, individuals began viewing the once unquestioned claims of religious authorities with growing skepticism and a crisis of credibility emerged from plurality. Secularization was born from this structural differentiation that eventually reached individual consciences and practices, bringing us to another layer of the concept of secularization which is more recent and therefore more familiar. Although related, these two layers, the contraction and separation of religious institutions and the decline in religious belief and practices, are different and occur in distinct historical moments.

In the 1970s, the golden age of theory of secularization studies, other important figures of European sociology also provided in depth contributions on this issue, not all of them concordant, with diverse messages and methodologies. For instance, Thomas Luckman, Berger's "celebrated collaborator" and also a religious believer, felt that in modern society religion is *privatized* and changes meaning, but does not lose importance. This is another dimension of the concept of secularization: the privatization of religion which has migrated from the public to the private sphere, but not necessarily disappeared (Luckmann 1963). Meanwhile, Bryan Wilson tried to systematize the study of secularization in the present, identifying variables, constructing models and using surveys and statistical series on religious participation. He concluded that the consubstantial rationalization of modernity meant that religion would continue being marginalized from public life until the majority of society became indifferent to it (Wilson 1985). Rather than make projections, other sociologists, like David Martin, tried to explain the varying paths that led to secularization in Europe, using a comparative international historic framework. Martin saw an inverse relationship between the degree of religious pluralism on the institutional level and secularization on the individual level. The greater the religious monopoly in a country, the greater and sharper would be the tendency toward

secularization. On the contrary, a plural religious environment was usually accompanied by a much more gradual tendency toward secularization (Martin 1978).

Despite these differences, it can be stated that around the 1970s a theory emerged, or even better, a paradigm, that while not commanding a massive consensus, provided a common conceptual framework on the relationship between society and religion in the modern world and a series of hypotheses which organized research. The overall idea was that religion in modern society was in serious danger. Although the seeds of secularization were sowed in traditional society it was still consubstantially a religious society. On the contrary, modern society and religion did not mix well and in order to understand this situation the best concept available was secularization.<sup>2</sup>

### Deconstructing secularization

In the 1980s the idea that modern societies were moving toward secularization was increasingly questioned. Various factors were often indicated to refute this idea, including the growing importance of religion in international politics, the appearance of revolutionary regimes headed by religious leaders and the vitality of new and old fundamentalisms in Europe and other parts of the world.

The decline of Marxism as a secular religion was cited less often than the resurgence of historical religions, but it may have been equally important. For a time, some experts studied the idea that Marxism could be the best example of how historical religions could be replaced with charismatic secular movements imbued with a profound sense of ethics. But the truth is that Marxism as a collective movement did not survive its routinization, unlike historic religions. In any case, these factors opened the door to a series of critics of secularization whose virulence raises the possibility that they had never been totally convinced by the idea and were anxiously waiting an opportunity to voice their disagreement. They went into action when they perceived that in certain sectors the three components of secularization (separation and contraction of religious institutions, privatization of religious practice and the decline in individual belief) had begun to be questioned.

As it became apparent that the dominant paradigm could be successfully challenged, the discipline of sociology itself, which had come to be so closely identified with it, was also questioned by extension. Some even claimed that sociology *held sacred* its commitment to secularization. The predominance of secularist and secularizing thought among the founding fathers of sociology, Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Spencer, etc., which was derived from the confrontation between liberal Europe and religion, had been transmitted through the discipline generation after generation through an interaction ritual chain. The idea of secularization and its values have been passed down to sociologists and, without realizing it, we have held it sacred. Remember that the founder of sociology and the positivist approach, August Comte, coined the term *sociology* at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to identify a new field of knowledge that would replace religious mystification as our moral guide in the turbulent and disorienting industrial world and he even defended establishing a new *religion of humanity* based on the new positivist and progressive principles. Comte was not alone: his predecessor Saint-Simon had said similar things and later Durkheim would say them as well, although more moderately. Despite their opposing political visions, other authorities in sociology such as Marx or Spencer shared a ferocious anti-clericalism and a deep mistrust of religion. This is why critics of secularization could

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<sup>2</sup> Possibly the most complete theoretical analysis on the concept of secularization in sociology was done by Taschannen (1991, 1992). For a more current and less detailed review see also Esteban (2007b).

say that the theory goes beyond empirical or theoretical evidence. They believed that the theory had mainly been the creation of European and euro-centric sociologists, religious believers or not, who had romanticized the religious past of their countries. They had acritically used an evolutionist framework, specifying a starting point, a traditional homogenously believing society, and an end point, a modern society progressively liberated from the influence of religion in the public and private realms. A good look at the theory of secularization reveals that it is built on beliefs of the past as well as the present. But these beliefs had not been accompanied by sufficient data and no effort had been made to refute alternative hypotheses of religious change: it could have been that Christianity was only in a temporary decline, as had occurred in the past, and not dying out. Only by not examining the alternatives or studying what really occurred did they maintain the theory intact, which in this light suddenly appeared less scientific and conclusive.

These doubts extend to the current situation of secularization. In principle, if we reduce the theory of secularization to its most empirical and immediately verifiable components, we should find a positive relationship between indicators of modernization and secularization in practices and beliefs. But variations within the Western world do not clearly validate these affirmations. The United States maintains surprisingly high percentages of religious participation compared to Europe. Within Europe itself, Western Germany is more modern but less secular than Eastern Germany. Outside of the West, neither Japan nor any of the late industrialization countries, like South Korea, are going through a process of secularization. In light of this, perhaps secularization is not a general theory and really only valid for a very specific period of European History. This appears to be Berger's current position. After having been one of the most influential proponents of this theory, he has foresworn it. It is time to admit, he says, that although modernization has had secularizing effects, more in some places than others, it has also provoked powerful anti-secularization movements and, therefore, it makes no sense to focus on a general assumption of secularization. Instead the focus should be on the unique secularity of Europe where belief persists, but participation is very low. Europe would be an exception within the new thesis of the desecularization of the world. Due to its history, Quebec should be an extension of secularist Europe; a bridgehead in North America in the same way that the media and university campuses occasionally are, especially the social sciences where the percentage of believers is significantly lower than in natural sciences (Berger 1999).

Other sociologists have gone even further and tried to construct a paradigm to rival secularization. In this undertaking the most notable effort has been put forth by Rodney Stark, who along with a series of collaborators has developed an ingenious *theory of religious economy* or of *religious market* around the concepts of religious demand – individual practice and belief – and religious supply – the different churches and organizations that try to meet that demand (Stark 2006). In Europe the real question is why, despite the high levels of believers indicated by surveys, these believers do not see the need to participate in religious institutions regularly. Stark tries to resolve this question with a series of axioms and reasoning. He starts with the idea that the truly important variable, that which explains variations in religious involvement, is the supply, the activity of the organizations. According to him, aggregate religious demand remains more or less constant through time and space, although sometimes it is latent. Individuals, however, vary in their needs and tastes, in religion just like in everything else; some demand a great deal of involvement and other less. Consequently, a single religious institution cannot entirely satisfy so much individual diversity. From this we can ascertain that the natural state of religion in all times and places is religious pluralism; the diversity of organizations which compete for believers or individual demand for religion.

Historically, however, this natural plural state has often been suppressed in favour of official religions, which created religious monopolies. In controlled markets, monopolies have no incentive to attract its congregation, since it is a captive audience, and they could get away with doing a poor job of carrying out their work without being expelled from the

market. This explains why religious apathy can exist even in the presence of both religious demand and belief, as studies have revealed: latent religious demand cannot be satisfied by complacent organizations. This also provides insight into why there are so many *believers without belonging*.<sup>3</sup> Since religion has traditionally been a controlled market, many specifically demanded religious niches have no longer been filled. Religious apathy is the consequence of centuries of religious regulation. Stark contends that it is no coincidence that states that provide the best salaries to the clergy, such as Germany and Scandinavia, have the highest rates of secularity. Contrary to Berger's initial idea, the best guarantee of religious vitality was found in situations with a healthy competitive pluralism, as shown by how Islam is bolstered by the struggle between different sects and also the religious rebirth of Latin America, which must be attributed to an enterprising evangelical movement which has carved a place in a market that was previously dominated by a soporific Catholic monopoly (Stark 2006).

Although the theory of religious economy has been strongly criticized, the truth is that it has stimulated researchers to mount a defense of the secularization paradigm through new empirical work and new models of secularization. Some of the most important recent work in this area are by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris who, using survey data from more than sixty countries in different stages of modernization, have arrived at the conclusion that there is sufficient evidence to talk about a process of secularization of beliefs, but only in societies that are rich and provide its citizens with a sufficient feeling of personal and social security. The absence of sufficient social protection in the United States helps to explain its particular religious vitality. Religion prospers with uncertainty and vulnerability, not necessarily pluralism (Inglehart and Norris 2004). But above all Stark's challenges have contributed to the orthodox view of secularization being reformulated in much stricter terms.

The gauntlet thrown down by Stark has been picked up by the British sociologist Steve Bruce (Bruce 2002, 2006). Bruce does not believe that international comparisons support Stark's conclusions, after all in Europe religious identification is much greater in countries monopolized by a single church, such as Ireland or Poland, than in more diverse countries, such as Great Britain. Bruce believes that the correct strategy to approach this issue consists in using diachronic studies of a specific country. What such studies reveal is that as countries become more diverse they also grow more secular, fundamentally because individuals become autonomous and begin to lose their religious ties. Moreover, he does not believe that the United States is an exception. Bruce sustains that despite the dominant individualism in that country, conditions such as the diffuse federal structure of the administration, the vast size of the country and the freedom of press allow conservative Christians to construct separated subcultures that can remain relatively isolated from alternative cultures, immunizing the individual from the dissolvent effects of diversity. Through a parallel world of schools, universities, businesses, newspapers, television stations, travel agencies, etc., conservative Christians retain much of the hegemony that Christianity enjoyed in preindustrial Europe. Conceptually, Bruce finds economic theory a poor approach to religion, since religion has never simply been another preference, but rather an inherited social identity: traditionally a person could only change religion at very high personal cost. Economic theory may be quite useful to explain why certain products are bought, but not to explain profound transformations in identity, which is precisely the basis upon which preferences are organized.

This brings us to a paradox: only in societies that are already very secularized on the structural level can religion be changed like furniture. The theory of religious economy's attack on the theory of secularization is only plausible in a state of advanced

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<sup>3</sup> According to Davie's famous expression (Davie 1990).

secularization where religious change does not have profound social consequences. So there is no reason to completely do away with the old theory of secularization. Rather, in the face of poor interpretations by some of its critics, the time has come to reformulate it as precisely and vigorously as possible. This implies making it clear that the theory of secularization has always been implicitly limited to the Western world and also admitting that opposing tendencies can arise locally, such as emigration or nationalism, that delay the development of the process. Finally, it needs to be emphasized that this theory does not sustain that secularization is inevitable, but that once it is extended it is irreversible, unless we can imagine a shift in the growing cultural autonomy of the individual. This does not necessarily mean that atheism will become generalized, but rather that religion will be relegated to public indifference along the lines of what Wilson said earlier. The secularization paradigm, no matter how dull, is the most faithful and least biased way to represent reality (Bruce 2006).

The situation that this passionate debate creates is much more typical of sociology: two interpretations of religious change, the theory of secularization and the theory of religious economy, confronting each other with great resolve and determination. The theory of secularization works with fundamentally European material and considers the United States a temporary exception. The theory of religious economy universalizes the US model and treats Europe as an unnatural anomaly on its way to being repaired. Despite mainly being centered on these terms it will be difficult to resolve the debate empirically because, as José Casanova, one of the most perceptive sociologists of religion, points out, it conceals a deeply rooted misunderstanding derived from the different experience of Europeans and Americans (Casanova 2003). In Europe the secularization experiment was initially a reduction in size, power and functions of the churches compared to that of secular institutions. The decline in religious practices and beliefs came later and was derived from the former. In contrast, the United States was born proclaiming the absence of an official religion and the separation of church and state. Therefore, structural secularization is taken for granted and there is no evidence that this separation has led to a decline in religious practices and beliefs; on the contrary, the opposite seems true. Furthermore, the separation of church and state did not eliminate religion from public debate. Progressive political causes, from civil rights to the election of President Obama, have always counted on different forms of religious support and expression (Davie 2010).

Perhaps one way to find a way out of this theoretical impasse in which neither of the theories can assert hegemony over sociology of religion studies, would be to analyze in greater detail the evolution of other Western societies. Among them, Canada is in a perfect position because its way of life is growing progressively similar to that of the United States (although Canadian ambivalence to the power of its southern neighbor is noteworthy), while at the same time its institutions are based on British and French references, to which must be added diverse immigrations from Europe and later from the rest of the world. In socio-religious terms, David Martin places contemporary Canada halfway between the United States, with high participation and no official religion, and Great Britain, with low participation and an official religion that, although residual, is still acknowledged and enjoys certain privileges. After observing the historical case it can be concluded that the Canadian case is a severe setback for the religious market theorists who wish to expand their theory outside the United States, since in Canada the disestablishment of religion and its corresponding liberalization has diminished religious participation. Even so, overall religious participation in Canada is notably higher than in European societies with a similar level of development. All things considered, the verdict on the Canadian case is not enough to break the impasse (Esteban 2007a).

Research in particular case studies encourages us to conclude that we should limit ourselves to emphasizing historic contingencies of the secularization process and reject the temptation to generalize. But, obviously, this is of little help in constructing an overall vision that can guide us. In this sense I believe that Casanova is right when he argues in

favour of refocusing the issue and adopting an even more global perspective. This can be achieved by making an effort to reach a broader vision of the relations between religion and modernity, which would also allow us to better define and take measure of the categories and ideas with which until now we have been understanding this relation (Casanova 2006). We should start with the fact that perhaps we do not need to completely do away with the concept of secularization, as some sectors have called for, but rather we should reserve it to describe a particular historical process which transformed European Christianity. In reality, this concept loses relevance outside of Europe. As we have seen, some meanings of this term are problematic for the United States and even more so for other regions that are profoundly influenced by ethical and doctrinal regimes that have always been “worldly”, such as areas in which Confucianism has left its mark.

With this in mind, to what point is it useful to continue equating secularization with modernity? This point of view, which has been dominant in Europe for a long time, does not allow us to contemplate the possibility of a non-secular and non-Western modernity: the provincial European and ethnocentric bias is evident. It is possible that if we do not strongly question this idea we will not be able to understand the world outside of Europe, nor, paradoxically, what is particular to the historical experience of European secularization itself. Extremely interesting and particular phenomena such as the patterns of fusion and fission of states, churches, nations and non-religious points of view have been overshadowed by the search for one-dimensional tendencies. These dynamics probably explain the particular way Europeans relate to religion. Although the exact causes are far from clear, the truth is that in Europe once the national state assumed the functions of maintaining and promoting collective national identity, religions began losing the ability to function as religions of personal salvation for large parts of the population. But this did not imply that national churches disappeared, nor were their existences questioned, instead they were simply prolonged as traditional entities. This also helps to explain the existence of *belonging without believing* in so many sectors of society, the complement to *believing without belonging*. Once large sectors of the population lose faith there is no great demand for another, partly because the national churches continue to exist as traditional public services that citizens have the right to use when the need arises: rites of passage, national crises, collective identification, etc. Different approaches have recently emphasized the need to place processes of secularization and counter-secularization in frameworks of sociopolitical conflict, rather than economic conflicts, and relate them to the activity of nationalist movements (Gorski 2003; Spohn 2010).

### **Reformulating secularisms**

As a consequence of the theory of secularization losing its status as a global theory of religion in modernity, and of the impossibility of generalizing the European experience, emerges the issue of the undeniable triumph of what has been called the secular regime in Europe. According to Casanova, what needs to be explained is not so much the triumph of secularization in Europe, but rather the fact that this change has been interpreted as *normal and progressive*, as an almost normative consequence of being a modern, enlightened European that has transcended religion. Despite our inveterate tendency, the explanation cannot be found in general processes of modernization, but rather in particular European developments. The theory of secularization, inadvertently or not, has played and can still play an ideological role: it has functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy. For Casanova, the study of modern secular ideology as a generalized worldview, as a social movement, as an idea taken for granted by modern man and the social sciences, is one of the most important tasks of the discipline today. Apropos of this, he found it surprising that in an academy that had dedicated the last few decades to deconstructing virtually everything, not long ago secularism had remained untouchable and its genealogy unexamined (Casanova 2006a).

A first attempt to rectify this situation has been made by the Quebecois philosopher Charles Taylor with his monumental book *A Secular Age*, which is worth spending some time on (Taylor 2007). His book explores the paths of contemporary secularisms, taking as its point of departure the dissatisfaction with definitions used for secularization. Taylor is not convinced by definitions of secularity which describe it as the decline in belief. On the contrary, he feels that that we are in a plural situation of many beliefs, rather than a decline; lack of affiliation to a religion does not necessarily imply a lack of belief. Neither is he completely convinced that religion has been removed from the public sphere. The fact that majority religions have lost their “official” status does not mean that religions no longer have a public role, but rather that their roles have been transformed. For years Casanova has pointed out religion’s return to the public sphere and its compatibility with the secular condition (Casanova 1994).

In contrast, according to Taylor, the most notable effect of living in a secular era is that adhering to a religious belief is problematic on various fronts. Believers are surrounded by various other religious beliefs that seem reasonable and are possible alternatives. To try and understand the current situation, Taylor carried out historical research which sought to reveal what changed from a time when belief in God was an essential part of the framework of meanings to another where this belief is optional or disputed. He identifies the ascendance of *exclusive humanism* as the main cause of this evolution. Exclusive humanism is the moral and spiritual point of view that interprets everything human exclusively in worldly terms. The questioning of religion and the eventual arrival of a secular age is a result of the emergence and triumph of the exclusive humanism narrative, which can be explained historically. We can only interpret this process as *progress* or *natural* to the degree that we link ourselves to this narrative. According to Taylor, the enlightened man does not emerge simply by taking off a blindfold and the seeing the true nature of society for the first time clearly and calmly, finally free from dreams, mystifications and anxieties; on the contrary, it is the result of a much more complicated and torturous process in which ironically religious motives and aspirations are what provide the initial decisive impulse. Of course there are various other factors that intervene in this process that should not be underestimated, but it is important to indicate that the process was put into motion due to religious causes. Weber had earlier identified this impulse in Protestantism, but Taylor reminds us of the importance of the reform movements within Medieval Catholicism itself. These Christian reform movements –Protestant and Catholic – contributed to bringing discipline and peace and reorganizing social life emerging from feudal disorder. The objective was not merely to reform personal conduct, but rather to transform and reconstruct societies to make them more peaceful, more organized and more productive. Thanks to this rationalizing process society was finally conceived as a system, as a group of individuals, active subjects of a new self-defined moral order. The creation of this new anthropocentric system is reflected in the emergence of new orders in which individuals associated in the economic, social and political spheres and expanding to the crucial fields of knowledge and morality.

The belief of many secularists that the secular view was spontaneously and naturally reached once religion was removed or withdrawn, is mistaken and ideological, the product of circular reasoning not in line with historical facts. But only this kind of reasoning allows us to contemplate the contraction of religious belief or practice as a natural or progressive process. This does not mean that the current situation can be structured in terms of a simple binary opposition between believers and unbelievers. Exclusive humanism doesn’t reign unopposed. The challenge comes from what Taylor calls the *immanent Counter-Enlightenment*: movements such as postmodernism, relativism, environmentalism or expressivism, which question anthropocentrism and modern rationalism from different angles. None of the three major groups in confrontation can claim victory and, sometimes, very surprising alliances between the contenders arise. According to Taylor, the modern age is not as incompatible with religion as certain

secularisms would have us believe. The European experience cannot be made universal. Not only is religion not incompatible with modern science, but it can also provide modernity patterns of thought and values which will help us escape from anomia, the emptiness of materialism and the complete absence of transcendence that many people find difficult to endure. The malaise of the modern age has much to do with this. As we have already said, the secular age is characterized by a profusion of different religious and spiritual positions. Many of them have been created in modernity and many people go from one to another. According to Taylor, the secular age closes old avenues of faith, but it opens other forms of relations with transcendence. Taylor predicts that if secularization, as he understands it, is here to stay, it will be increasingly challenged and possibly transformed. In fact, it would be more correct to talk about secularisms, in the plural, because the interpretation of the secular principle in different sociopolitical regimes has differed quite a bit depending on the historical moment and social conditions. Some secularisms, such as the French or Turkish, impose very strict limits on the freedom of religious expression. Therefore, in his attempt to accommodate and integrate cultural minorities, Taylor has argued for an *open secularism* for his native Quebec which does not relegate religious expressions exclusively to the private sphere and that at the same time guarantees the neutrality of the state, emptying public institutions of all religious color (Esteban and López Sala 2009).

We are living in an unexpected modern age, in which the retreat or irresolution of the secularization process is an important element. For decades the expectations of how the present would be and what to expect in the future laid the foundation for the idea, included in the theory of modernization, that in the modern age all societies would gradually converge, in the end becoming similar to Western societies. This sketch of social change was the principle ally of the idea of secularization. But the idea that there is a master model for modern society has increasingly been discredited. Over the past few years an alternative idea known as “multiple modernities” has arisen around the figure of the recently deceased Samuel Eisenstadt (Eisenstadt 2000, 2010). This idea proposes that today’s modernities are closely tied to the particular trajectory that a society follows and, therefore, different societies develop different types of modernity. This seems to be a superior starting point for the analysis of relations between religion and modernity because it liberates us from the teleological burden inherent in the idea of a preset beginning and end that underlies the theory of secularization. In this way we can find better approaches to study the new forms that religions are adopting due to the impact of globalization. Studying how they are transforming and adapting to the new realities of globalization will be much richer and flexible than if we simply ask whether or not they are disappearing. Multiple modernities allow us to think about a modern world in which globalization and its processes, with migrations at the head, present threats to universal religions as the traditional relations that these religions have maintained between history, peoples and territories slowly dissolve under the pressure of globalization. Each of these universal religions is challenged in different ways and will probably respond in different ways. But at the same time the new globalizing mediums and processes represent a great opportunity for them because they can free themselves from the territorial limits of the nation-state and recover the transnational dimensions of these, precisely, universal religions. These new religious constellations are new areas for connections as well as disputes, for which we need a new conceptual and political arsenal. Secularization will continue occupying a prominent position, but it will certainly be divested of all its imperialist, homogenizing and normative traits.

Contrary to the predictions of a few decades past, the religious question does not seem to be worn out. Over the past few years we have witnessed a resurgence of militant atheist thought, as evidenced by the huge sales of books by Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennet, among others. At the same time we have been flooded with studies from various sources acknowledging the contributions of religion to the evolution of thought and human society. The least militant section has provided a notable series of reflections on the process

of secularization. Perhaps what is most significant is that this implies that it will be impossible to reach another consensus on the process, its reach and its nature. The master narrative of secularization, which had almost reached the status of gospel, is in crisis. At the moment all we can do is point out the disagreements about what the theory of secularization means and what it implies, from when we can speak of it historically, if it is reversible or not, if it is more important to talk about the privatization or decline of belief, if it is a strictly European phenomenon or if it is global, if it is the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy, if it is produced by science and industrialization, if it will be exported from Europe to other parts of the world as different regions industrialize, if it is a strictly Christian or post-Christian phenomenon, if it is consubstantial to modernity itself, or if only Islam provides a genuine alternative. The case has been reopened. The accepted evidence and theories are on trial.

After the era of the great revolutions that inaugurated the modern age, European society reflected upon the social changes and the role of religion in the new society principally using the idea of secularization. With the help of ethnocentric social sciences, the idea was reinforced and projected as the inevitable destiny of all humanity. This idea was maintained for a time, but as it was gradually discredited for the world outside of Europe, its central premise, that it is a natural process, has also been questioned. Projecting our particular experience (real or received) with religion on others is questionable. No matter how difficult or laborious, overcoming certain preconceived notions about reality would allow us to start to overcome the perplexities that many Europeans face when we deal with religion in the modern world. Pointedly, some sectors of European society have only discovered secularism as a reaction to the demands of new religious groups, generally associated with immigrant populations. In light of the new situations arising from *de facto* multiculturalism, the tolerant practices and values of democratic secularism must be updated, beyond the reactive secularism that is sometimes used to disguise ethnocentrism.

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