



Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta: Religion in der Moderne. Ein internationaler Vergleich *Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2015*

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The term ‘secularization’ has dominated the field of the social scientific study of religion for decades, either as an almost ideological assertion of the inevitable decline of religion or as a phrase invoking endless debates on its validity as a theoretical explanation of the dropping societal significance of traditional churches. It is extremely hard to resolve the dispute even on empirical grounds, partly because the diverse concepts of secularization – just like many common or fashionable social scientific terms – lack an exact definition, or at least approximately uniform interpretation or a generally accepted use. The various or even vague concept of religion of researchers, as well as many alternative and in certain ways contradictory theoretical explanatory models of religious change make the overview of this area even more difficult. Thus, the authors of the present book have undertaken a rather difficult task to systematize existing knowledge and conclusions drawn so far within this research area, and also to add their new findings and insights.

The authors begin their work with an in-depth definitional and methodological clarification (Part I). During this discussion, they consistently acknowledge that the theoretical work can not be an end in itself. On the contrary, it should be an essential tool of empirical social research since without this it is impossible to delimit the phenomena to be tested and to interpret the test results. At the same time, they emphasize in several places that theorizing must be done without preconceptions, what in their opinion has been the most common weakness within previous research, and wherein lies the novelty of their current volume.

They attempt to extract the meaning of the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘religion’ in detail. This is not to say that the argumentation is becoming lost in philological or philosophical excursions. While they review some previous understandings, they confine their attention on those references which offer a key to the scientific examination of the relationship between the two social phenomena. Their goal is

to achieve an interpretation of them that are both simple enough and sufficiently nuanced to lay the foundations for further analysis. As the result of their definitional efforts, on the one hand, they attribute functional differentiation to modernity as its most characteristic aspect – a persuasive choice despite leaving it somewhat unclear exactly what kind of causal mechanisms link them together (Chapter 1). On the other hand, they successfully link the functional and substantive definitional approaches of religion inasmuch as they regard all social phenomena ‘religious’ which provide answers to the questions raised by the problem of contingency (the functional aspect), based on the simultaneity of transcendence and immanence (the substantive aspect) (Chapter 2).

After a brief methodological outlining (Chapter 3), the book is continued with discussing the secondary analysis of survey data on religiosity in the light of national cultural-historical contexts.

Part II focuses on the religious decline in Western Europe through three case studies. The Western part of Germany with a moderately secularized culture and with a relatively stable public presence of traditional churches exemplifies a midway between the other two scrutinized countries (Chapter 4). Catholic Italy appears to be one of the most religious countries of Western Europe, which has experienced even slight increases in the religious field (Chapter 5). The Netherlands, however, can be regarded as one of the most unchurched countries of Western Europe and characterized by an exceptionally strong secularization.

In Part III, the authors explore the alleged religious boom in Eastern Europe after the political transitions, an evidence cited by many against the secularization thesis. In the case of Russia (Chapter 7) and Poland (Chapter 9), the importance of national identity emerges. As to the former, it can be concluded that the rising numbers of church affiliation has much more to do with national sentiments than with personal belief and socialization. In the latter case, it seems that the surprisingly high level of belief and high vitality of Catholicism is due to the political role of the Church during the centuries of Polish history in defending threatened identity and at the same time providing community space for persecuted opposition groups. The case of East Germany (Chapter 8) raises the question of why the rate of religiosity has fallen to an exceptionally low level during the decades of communist rule, which has not necessarily happened in other Eastern Bloc countries, and why it remained at about the same level after 1989 despite playing an important public role during the political transition similar to that of the Polish Church.

The authors scrutinize the religious changes outside of Europe through three further case studies in Part IV. The example of the United States of America has been mostly applied as the counter-evidence of secularization or the starting point of religious market model. As the authors argue, however, it seems that both theoretical preoccupations obscure reality. Similar to the South Korean case (as

presented in Chapter 11), it rather shows how non-religious functions combined with more strictly church-related activities contribute to the revitalization of religious life and provide its limitations at the same time. Together with their comparison of Charismatic, Pentecostal, and Evangelical movements in Europe, the USA, and Brazil (Chapter 12), they suggest that it is highly context-dependent how religious minorities can relate to the dominant religious cultures and whether and how they can become quickly growing groups in certain strata of a given society, most often at the cost of other major denominations.

The lengthiest part of the study (Part II to Part IV) is certainly not aimed at providing evidence for or against secularization theory nor at giving a proof of the inability to offer a universalistic explanative framework of trends of religiosity within contemporary societies. Much more it is an implementation of the authors' methodological principles. That is, they try to re-evaluate the much-quoted and thus well-known – or, rather, often misunderstood or selectively examined – data, mainly from the European Values Study and World Values Survey. And, as mentioned above, they try to carry out this analysis without the previous assumption of a religious decline or revival. They assert rightly that only this way it is possible to explore the underlying causes of both trends and the bewildering diversity of contemporary religiosity in Europe and worldwide.

Moreover, the analysis of the religious change in the individual countries serves to develop common principles beyond country-specific features and historical circumstances in order to understand in a wider framework how these factors impact churches and religious situation in general. Part V aims to explicate systematic perspectives based on these findings. First, they test by multi-level models in cross-country comparisons how diverse individual and contextual factors explain intensity of religiosity and various rates of religious indicators (Chapter 13). Here, one could raise the objection that the way how the concept of modernization – closely related with contingency and the concept of horizontal and vertical functional differentiation as described above – is operationalized through the chosen variables (the approval of Church–state separation, GINI coefficient, GDP and welfare expenditures) might need further theoretical clarification and justification. However, the available variables of the databases applied have evidently limited the possibility of the analysis. Apart from that, the key findings indeed sound convincing.

As a concluding section, Chapter 14 summarizes these theoretical insights, together with the brief evaluation of earlier theoretical models as well as the suggested new theorems. Whereas the authors started their study with distancing themselves from existing theoretical viewpoints or taking their substantial assertions for granted, they are not inclined to commit themselves to any of them even at the end of their inquiry. Instead, they offer a multi-paradigmatic approach. The proposed set of theorems – theory of differentiation and de-

differentiation, absorption hypothesis, distraction hypothesis, coupling thesis, overpowering thesis, thesis of the simultaneous presence of religion in different levels of society, theorem of the majority confirmation, theorem of internal diversification, and conflict hypothesis – all show a relationship between religion and society presumably more complex than the previous theoretical approaches have assumed.

The value of the presented study lies not only in its efforts to outline new theoretical and methodological approaches and to put the existing ones into new light by re-evaluating them on a thorough and sound empirical basis. The volume is at the same time an insightful systematization of previous works in the field of the social scientific study of religion, rich in data and comprehensive references, building on the classical and also on the most recent publications in the scope. A must-read for all who are interested in contemporary religiosity and an essential item for those dealing with social research.