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2. Religion and Modernization in Comparative Perspective – David Martin's Theory of Secularization reconsidered

Willfried Spohn

David Martin's general theory of secularization is the most elaborated historical-sociological theory of the varying processes of secularization in the European Christian civilization. However, Martin's theory has been rarely taken up in systematic ways--if so, as a directly testable theory of present degrees of secularization in Europe, rather than in its theoretical bases and historical comparative scope.

I myself have come across Martin's theory in my historical-sociological research on religion, nation-building and class formation in 19th and 20th centuries Germany in an Euro-

pean-American comparative framework. On this basis, the following reconsideration should be understood both as a plea and a critical continuation of Martin's historical-sociological methodology.

I start with a brief reconstruction of the basic principles of Martin's theory of secularization and then continue in turn with a reconsideration of the main causal clusters affecting the secularization processes: the role of the religious structures; the geopolitical frame conditions; and the socio-economic contexts of secularization.

I. The basic principles

Against the now weakening mainstream of the evolutionistic secularization thesis, Martin has in mind an historical-empirical theory of secularization. Instead of presupposing secularization as a universal by-product of modernization, Martin insists on a strictly empirically generalizing theory. Restricting the scope of his analysis to European Christianity (including its North and South American off-spring), his theory claims – no more and no less – to provide a general explanation of the manifold forms and processes of secularization within the European civilization.

The starting point of Martin's theory is the contemporary religious map of European and American societies and regions. At the time of the publication of Martin's book, this map in terms of institutional participation and subscribed beliefs looked like the following. In Europe, the dominant Protestant societies were most secularized, Britain highly and the Scandinavian countries very highly; mixed societies like the Netherlands and Germany had a medium degree of secularization; dominant Catholic societies ranged from low (Italy and Spain) to high (Hungary) and very high secularization (France); and Orthodox societies like Romania and Russia were characterized by medium to high secularization. In contrast, in dominantly Protestant North America and dominantly Catholic South America the degrees of secularization were very low. At the present, this religious map has only to be revised regarding the religious revival in post-Communist Eastern Europe.

In order to explain these variations in secularization, Martin starts from the cultural-institutional core of each religious type. The basic religious figurations of Protestantism, Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy as well as its varying mixtures in each national framework have been the result both of the divide between Western and Eastern Christianity and the balancing between Reformation and Counter-reformation. As a result, the degrees of institutional monopolism or pluralism within each country have been formed. They in turn determine the basic tracks of secularization. Martin's first basic principle assumes that the stronger the religious monopolism is the stronger are the secularization tendencies or vice versa, the stronger the religious pluralism is the weaker are the secularization processes.

II. The basic patterns

On the basis of the cultural-institutional core of a religious pattern and the related degrees of pluralism or monopolization, Martin distinguishes eight main religious/secular figurations:

Within Protestantism 1. the North-American pattern with an outspoken denominational pluralism and low secularization; 2. the British pattern with a limited pluralism between the Anglican and the dissenting sectors and correspondingly limited secularization; 3. the Scandinavian pattern with strongly limited pluralism and strong secularization; within the confessionally dualistic societies 4. the mixed pattern with dominant Protestantism and subdominant Catholicism and a medium degree of asymmetrical secularization; within Catholic societies 5. the French-Latin pattern of Catholic monopoly with a sharp opposition between strong secularization and religious integration; a sub-type is 6. the right-wing reactive organicism; an extension is also 7. the Latin-American pattern with less monopolization and secularization; and 8. the Russian pattern of Orthodox monopoly with outspoken secularization and an inverted left-wing secular monopoly.

In a first approximation, this typology of religious-secular patterns provides a rough explanation of the range between low to high secularization on the European-American religious map: from Protestant pluralism to confessional dualism to Catholic monopoly and Orthodox monopoly. However, certain inconsistencies between the qualitative dimension of cultural-institutional forms and the quantitative continuum from pluralism to monopolism remain. To solve these inconsistencies one should consider--this is my first critical thesis--first the qualitative structure of a religious figuration and only then its degree of pluralism or monopolization.

First, in the Protestant cases, the wide range secularization degrees between the U.S., Great Britain, Sweden and Protestant Germany can only be explained by including the substantial differences between Calvinism and Lutheranism. Second, also in the Protestant/Catholic mixed cases like the Netherlands and Germany the qualitative differences between Calvinism and Lutheranism matter. And third, in the case of religious monopolies, an explanation of the differences in secularization between Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy has to include their different institutional and cultural forms.

III. The geo-political environments

The religious structures alone do not suffice to explain in a deductive manner the historical paths of secularization in each case. As a second dimension, Martin's theory takes into account the political-institutional environments which the religious-secular configurations are embedded in. Basically, Martin's theory distinguishes between two opposite structural poles: center and periphery. His second basic principle states that the centrifugal tendencies of secularization within each religious pattern come to effect in a pure form only under the conditions of political center-formation, whereas the centripetal forces of religious integration become stronger under peripheral conditions.

With the center/periphery model, Martin is able to approximate more adequately the basic patterns to the empirical variations of secularization. Particularly, he can explain the important exceptions of high religious integration in peripheral national and ethnic groups in the few Western European cases and the many Eastern European ones. This bi-polar center-periphery model, however, is primarily drawn from the modern Western European nation-state. It can be applied – this is my second critical thesis – only with reservations to other

regions where the development of the modern nation-state is lacking or has taken modified routes. To make the center/periphery model more accurate, I propose a more complex model of scalar center-periphery relations that distinguishes in institutional and cultural terms imperial, national and ethnic-regional levels of center/periphery formation.

To begin with, only the Western European Atlantic zone did early on experience modern state-formation and nation-building, establishing a firm institutional framework for religious figurations and secularization patterns. In Central Europe, by contrast, an integrated nation-state was materializing only relatively late; under these conditions, organized religion was bound up with transnational-imperial or regional-ethnic structures, modifying the religious figurations and secularization patterns. In Eastern Europe, even more so, imperial-bureaucratic structures combined with peripheral forms of nation-building until quite recently, strengthening the religious integration of ethnic and national groups. Finally, also in the European settlement societies in America the geopolitical constellations combined different colonial regimes, indigenous structures and immigration patterns, modifying also the respective secularization trajectories.

IV. Socio-economic contexts

By combining the religious figurations its political environments, David Martin's theory of secularization comes very close to the empirical variations of secularization on the European-American religious map. Still, some discrepancies between the model of secularization and its empirical variations remain. As a third dimension, Martin takes also into consideration, though very briefly, three main stages of socio-economic modernization: the pre-industrial period, the first and the second phase of industrialization. David Martin's third principle states that these socio-economic stages are related to degrees of social disintegration and secularization.

Although, according to Martin, the impact of modernization on secularization is refracted by the religious and political structures, he is accepting here the classical assumption of a parallel movement between modernization and secularization. This assumption, however, has come under increasing criticism by the recent history and sociology of religion reanalyzing the Western industrializing societies themselves. On this basis, I formulate my third critical thesis: Secularization is not a direct structural outcome of socio-economic modernization, but it depends on the interaction between modernization and religion. The core issue is whether or not religious communities disintegrate, remain stable, or even innovatively change under the impact of socio-economic modernization.

Precisely the first two industrial nations, England and the United States show the lowest secularization degrees in terms of religious membership, participation and belief per capita. The crucial reason for this is independent religious community-building on the micro-level as a reaction to socio-economic modernization. In contrast, the catching-up industrializers in Western and Central Europe – the locus classicus of the secularization thesis – did not possess this micro-mechanism of independent religious community-building, hence industrialization correlated with secularization. The only modifications were the Catholic subcultures in the mixed pattern. Finally, in the industrial latecomers in Eastern Europe, the

corrosive effects of socio-economic modernization combined to a large extent with ideocratic communism, but as an imposed secularism it was only partially able to destroy traditional religious communities; hence the conspicuous contemporary religious revival. Also in the industrial latecomers in Latin America secularization has been relatively weak, due to less cohesive Catholic monopoly, the development of social Catholicism and the dynamics of Protestant denominationalism. In sum, secularization is not a general consequence of industrialization, its timing and form; rather it depends on the religious activities and institution-building in the context of socio-economic modernization.

V. Conclusion

This tour de force through Martin's theory of secularization could do no more than give some hints to its systematic structure and some suggestions for critical reconsideration. My hope is that this may serve as a methodological basis for more systematic historical-sociological comparative research on the complex configurations of religious change and secularization in the modern world.

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3. Kommentar zu Willfried Spohn

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The recent debate on the concept of secularization, as raised by American and Anglo-Saxon sociologists and social historians – some of whom even claimed a paradigm shift in the sociology of religion (Warner 1993) – is not at all a new debate. This is shown best by the work of David Martin (1969) who, in his 1969 book – »The Religious and the Secular« –