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Public Religions in the Modern World



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Pre-text: Religion in the 1980s

Religion in the 1980s "went public" in a dual sense. It entered the "public sphere" and gained, thereby, "publicity." Various "publics"—the mass media, social scientists, professional politicians, and the "public at large"—suddenly began to pay attention to religion. The unexpected public interest derived from the fact that religion, leaving its assigned place in the private sphere, had thrust itself into the public arena of moral and political contestation. Above all, four seemingly unrelated yet almost simultaneously unfolding developments gave religion the kind of global publicity which forced a reassessment of its place and role in the modern world. These four developments were the Islamic revolution in Iran; the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland; the role of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution and in other political conflicts throughout Latin America; and the public reemergence of Protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics.

During the entire decade of the 1980s it was hard to find any serious political conflict anywhere in the world that did not show behind it the not-so-hidden hand of religion. In the Middle East, all the religions and fundamentalisms of the region—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—fed by old power struggles, were meeting each other in civil and uncivil wars. Old feuds between the various world religions and between branches of the same religions were flaring up again from Northern Ireland to Yugoslavia, from India to the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, religious activists and churches were becoming deeply involved in struggles for liberation, justice, and democracy throughout the world. Liberation theologies were spreading beyond Latin America, acquiring new forms and names, African and Asian, Protestant and Jewish, black and feminist. With the collapse of socialism, liberation theology seemed the only "International" that was left.

The decade, which began in 1979 with the Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions, the visit of the Polish pope to Poland, and the establishment of the "Moral Majority," ended as dramatically and as ambiguously as it had begun, with the Salman Rushdie "affair," the death of Ayatollah

Khomeini, the final triumph of Solidarity reverberating throughout Eastern Europe, and Gorbachev's visit to the pope. It was symbolically fitting that even the Romanian Revolution was sparked by a Hungarian Reformed pastor. No less telling was the fact that in El Salvador the decade which had opened with the assassination of Archbishop Romero closed with the murder of yet six more Jesuits by state terror.

Throughout the decade religion showed its Janus face, as the carrier not only of exclusive, particularist, and primordial identities but also of inclusive, universalist, and transcending ones. The religious revival signaled simultaneously the rise of fundamentalism and of its role in the resistance of the oppressed and the rise of the "powerless." Ali Shariati, the intellectual father of the Islamic revolution, in translating Franz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre*, chose the resonant Koranic term *mostaz'afin* (the disinherited). The term "the disinherited of the earth" was to occupy a central place in the rhetoric of the Islamic revolution.¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, effected a similar transvaluation from secular back to religious categories when he turned the proletariat into the biblical *los pobres*. "The eruption of the poor in history" became one of the central categories of Gutiérrez's eschatological theology.² A similar term, "the power of the powerless," was coined by Vaclav Havel, the father of the "velvet" revolution.³ It all looked like modernization in reverse, from rational collective action back to primitive rebellion.

It is unlikely that these are mere historical coincidences. They can be seen rather as examples of biblical prophetic politics linking the Middle East, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The transvaluation of values which, according to Nietzsche, biblical slave morality had introduced into the dynamics of classical aristocratic civilization was apparently still at work. The archetypal dream of a liberating Exodus from enslavement had not yet lost its utopian, eschatological force.⁴

I have selectively left out of my account of religion in the 1980s many other religious phenomena which also gained wide publicity throughout the decade and certainly had public and political significance, but which were not in themselves varieties of what I call "public" religion. I have in mind such phenomena as "New Age" spirituality; the growth of cults and the ensuing controversies surrounding them; televangelism with all its peccadillos; the collective suicide of the residents of the People's Temple in Jonestown; the spread of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America; the rapid growth of Islam in the United States; the seriousness with which so many people in modern secular societies—including Nancy Reagan while at the White House—took astrology; the fact that

Manuel Noriega may have practiced voodoo; or the fact that most people everywhere continued to practice, or not to practice, religion in the 1980s in the same way they had in the 1970s.

Those were significant religious phenomena, and any comprehensive history of religion in the 1980s would have to include them. It is likely that quantitative surveys would select precisely those phenomena as being the typical, normal, and relevant ones. Nevertheless, one could still argue that they were not particularly relevant either for the social sciences or for the self-understanding of modernity, at least insofar as they do not present major problems of interpretation. They fit within expectations and can be interpreted within the framework of established theories of secularization. As bizarre and as new as they may be, they can nonetheless be taken for granted as typical or normal phenomena in the modern world. They can be classified as instances of "private" or of what Thomas Luckmann called "invisible" religion. Such religious phenomena per se do not challenge either the dominant structures or the dominant paradigms.

What was new and unexpected in the 1980s was not the emergence of "new religious movements," "religious experimentation" and "new religious consciousness"—all phenomena which caught the imagination of social scientists and the public in the 1960s and 1970s⁵—but rather the revitalization and the assumption of public roles by precisely those religious traditions which both theories of secularization and cyclical theories of religious revival had assumed were becoming ever more marginal and irrelevant in the modern world. Indeed, as Mary Douglas has rightly pointed out, "No one credited the traditional religions with enough vitality to inspire large-scale political revolt."⁶

The central thesis of the present study is that we are witnessing the "deprivatization" of religion in the modern world. By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. Social movements have appeared which either are religious in nature or are challenging in the name of religion the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state and the market economy. Similarly, religious institutions and organizations refuse to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations. One of the results of this ongoing contestation is a dual, interrelated process of repoliticization of the pri-

vate religious and moral spheres and renormalization of the public economic and political spheres. This is what I call, for lack of a better term, the "deprivatization" of religion.

I do not mean to imply that the deprivatization of religion is something altogether new. Most religious traditions have resisted all along the process of secularization as well as the privatization and marginalization which tend to accompany this process. If at the end they accepted the process and accommodated themselves to the differentiated structures of the modern world, they often did so only grudgingly. What was new and became "news" in the 1980s was the widespread and simultaneous character of the refusal to be restricted to the private sphere of religious traditions as different as Judaism and Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, Hinduism and Buddhism, in all "three worlds of development."

The inelegant neologism "deprivatization" has a dual purpose, polemical and descriptive. It is meant, first, to call into question those theories of secularization which have tended not only to assume but also to prescribe the privatization of religion in the modern world. Yet, while I agree with many of the criticisms that have been raised lately against the dominant theories of secularization, I do not share the view that secularization was, or is, a myth. The core of the theory of secularization, the thesis of the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, remains valid. But the term "deprivatization" is also meant to signify the emergence of new historical developments which, at least qualitatively, amount to a certain reversal of what appeared to be secular trends. Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between individual and society, between family, civil society, and state, between nations, states, civilizations, and the world system.

Basically, one can draw two lessons from religion in the 1980s. The first is that religions are here to stay, thus putting to rest one of the cherished dreams of the Enlightenment. The second and more important lesson is that religions are likely to continue playing important public roles in the ongoing construction of the modern world. This second lesson in particular compels us to rethink systematically the relationship of religion and modernity and, more important, the possible roles religions may play in the public sphere of modern societies. In this respect, the story of religion in the 1980s serves literally only as a *pre-text* for the book.

The Text: The Structure of the Book

The book itself is a study, both theoretical and empirical, of public religions in the modern world. The first two chapters address this task theoretically, trying to answer a question which, at least implicitly, would seem to be a contradiction in terms for theories of secularization as well as for most theories of modernity, namely, what are the conditions of possibility for modern public religions?

Chapter 1, "Secularization, Enlightenment, and Modern Religion," offers a critical review of the concept and the theory of secularization, embedded in a historical account of the development of Western modernity. It argues that the deprivatization of religion forces us to rethink and reformulate, but not necessarily to abandon uncritically, existing theories of secularization. The analysis shows that what passes for a single theory of secularization is actually made up of three different propositions: secularization as religious decline, secularization as differentiation, and secularization as privatization. It stresses the need to differentiate analytically and to evaluate differently the three main premises of the classical paradigm. The assumption that religion will tend to disappear with progressive modernization, a notion which has proven patently false as a general empirical proposition, is traced genealogically back to the Enlightenment critique of religion. The analysis affirms that the thesis of the differentiation of the religious and secular spheres is the still defensible core of the theory of secularization. But it holds the related proposition that modern differentiation *necessarily* entails the marginalization and privatization of religion, or its logical counterpart that public religions *necessarily* endanger the differentiated structures of modernity, to be no longer defensible.

What we need are better theories of the intermeshing of public and private spheres. In particular, we need to rethink the issue of the changing boundaries between differentiated spheres and the possible structural roles religion may have within those differentiated spheres as well as the role it may have in challenging the boundaries themselves. Chapter 2, "Private and Public Religions," begins to address some of these issues. It does not try to develop either a general theory or a comprehensive and exhaustive typology of public religions. It is a partly theoretical, partly typological exercise which draws on two different traditions, the comparative sociology of religions and theories of the public sphere and civil society, in order to examine those forms of modern public religion which may be both viable and desirable from a modern normative perspective. By "viable," I mean those forms of public religion which are not intrinsically incompatible with differentiated modern structures. By

"desirable," I mean those forms of public religion which may actually contribute to strengthening the public sphere of modern civil societies.

The core of the book, chapters 3 through 7, offers empirical studies of what could be called varieties of public religion in the modern world. It presents five cases of transformation of contemporary religion, chosen from two religious traditions—Catholicism and Protestantism—in four different countries: Spain, Poland, Brazil, and the United States. Each of the case studies tells a different and independent story of transformation. In the case of Spanish Catholicism, the problem at hand is the change from an established authoritarian state church to the disestablished church of a pluralist civil society. In the case of Poland, the analysis traces the more subtle change from a disestablished church that protects the nation against foreign rule to a national church that promotes the emergence of civil society against a Polish authoritarian state. The chapter on Brazilian Catholicism analyzes the radical transformation of the Brazilian church from a state-oriented oligarchic and elitist institution to a civil society-oriented populist one. Moving on to the United States, chapter 6 analyzes the transformation of Evangelical Protestantism in America from its public hegemonic status as a civil religion during the nineteenth century to its sectarian withdrawal into a fundamentalist subculture in the late 1920s to its public reemergence and mobilization in the 1980s. The last case study analyzes the transformation of American Catholicism from an insecure sect to a defensive private denomination to an assertive public one.

Since the criteria for choosing these particular case studies may not be self-evident, let me offer a rationale for the choice. From a hermeneutic point of view each story is intrinsically justifiable. Moreover, each of the five stories not only is interesting in itself but also serves to illustrate empirical instances of various types of public religion. Therefore, I have tried as much as possible to let the different stories speak for themselves without forcing an external analytical framework upon them. Placing all of them together, however, in a comparative-historical framework within a single sociological study brings out some asymmetries.

First, the comparison involves one Protestant and four Catholic cases. Such an asymmetry could be problematic if one were setting out to compare Catholicism and Protestantism as "private" religions of individual salvation. Viewed as salvation religions, Spanish, Polish, Brazilian, and American Catholicism are, despite some striking differences, fundamentally alike. In terms of religious beliefs and practices, the international differences within transnational Catholicism probably are not greater than those which may exist between the various sectors of the Catholic population within each country. In any case, the four Catholic churches share the same basic doctrines, rituals, and ecclesiastical struc-

ture. As "public" religions, however, the various national Catholic churches have exhibited historically clear and fundamental differences. Indeed, the comparison of Spanish, Polish, Brazilian, and American Catholicism seems to indicate that, at least since the emergence of the modern state, the public character of any religion is primarily determined by the particular structural location of that religion between state and society. Therefore, in studying possible varieties of public religion, a comparative group made up of four Catholic and one Protestant religions may be justified fully if it is instrumental in helping to develop an internally consistent typology of public religions.

Furthermore, the overconcentration on Catholicism can also be justified on theoretical grounds. Catholicism served as the central focus of the Enlightenment critique of religion. It offered for centuries the most spirited, principled, fundamentalist, and apparently futile resistance to modern processes of secularization and modernization in all spheres. It fought capitalism, liberalism, the modern secular state, the democratic revolutions, socialism, the sexual revolution. In brief, it has been the paradigmatic form of antimodern public religion. In the mid-1960s, however, the Catholic church inaugurated a tortuous process of official *aggiornamento* to secular modernity and accepted the legitimacy of the modern age. Yet it refuses to become a private religion. It wants to be both modern and public. Indeed, since the Second Universal Council (Vatican II) it has kept a highly public profile throughout the world.⁷

A second obvious asymmetry results from the fact that the group under consideration appears to be composed of three integral units and two fractions of a much larger unit, that is, by three national churches with quasi-monopolistic control over the religious market in their respective countries and two structurally very different denominations within a single, free, and highly pluralistic religious market. Again, the apparent imbalance may actually be theoretically helpful. Since freedom of religion and pluralism may be assumed to be structural conditions of modernity, the inclusion of two different denominations, U.S. Catholicism and Protestant fundamentalism, which illustrate different structural locations as well as different types of public religion within the same free and pluralistic religious system, may turn out to be an advantage in a comparative study which sets out to examine the conditions of possibility for public religions in the modern world.

Finally, either from the temporal-developmental perspective of modernization theory or from the spatial-developmental perspective of world system theory, questions could be raised about a study which includes countries at such different stages of modernization—that is, secularization—and which occupy such hierarchically asymmetrical positions within the world system. But the inclusion from the (no longer extant)

"three worlds" of development, or from the three world-systemic spaces—center, semiperiphery, and periphery—also turns out to be an advantage. If the study is able to show that public religions exist or have reemerged recently in all worlds of development, it will serve to support the assertion that the deprivatization of religion is indeed a global phenomenon.⁸

The final chapter, "The Deprivatization of Modern Religion," recapitulates the main theoretical arguments developed in the first two chapters, now substantiated by the historical evidence presented in the five case studies, draws out some comparisons and general conclusions from those studies, and reformulates more systematically the thesis of deprivatization, placing it in a more general and global perspective.

I acknowledge, however, a real imbalance. The present study is clearly a Western-centered study, both in terms of the particular cases chosen for investigation and in terms of the normative perspective guiding the investigation. Certainly, it would have been highly desirable to include the Iranian revolution as an additional case study. After all, the public resurgence of Islam has been one of the main developments thrusting religion back into public view. Studies of the deprivatization of Judaism in Israel, or of the deprivatization of Hinduism in India, or of the deprivatization of Buddhism in Burma would have been equally appropriate and desirable. Of course, such an immense task would have required a modification and expansion of my typology of public religions, of the theory of religious and political differentiation, and of the general analytical framework employed in this study. While difficult, such a task would not have been impossible.

Unfortunately, I have to plead limited time, knowledge, and resources, as well as a postmodern enhanced awareness of the dangers of excessive homogenization. I do not think, however, that non-Western cultures are "the other." All human languages are translatable, and all discourses are ultimately comprehensible. The room for misunderstanding and misinterpretation is certainly much greater in intercultural communications, but not necessarily different in principle from the dangers inherent in everyday communication, where we also frequently fail to get each other's messages. Moreover, anybody can be converted to any "faith." After all, it is the enduring revelation which humanity owes to *all* the universalistic salvation religions that any human person—irrespective of gender, race, class, clan, caste, tribe, ethnoses, etc.—may be "born again" into a new "self." We are all—we have become whether we like it or not—citizens of one single human civil society. It is up to all of us either to find or to make the rules which will govern our unavoidable communicative discourse.

1 Secularization, Enlightenment, and Modern Religion

Who still believes in the *myth* of secularization? Recent debates within the sociology of religion would indicate this to be the appropriate question with which to start any current discussion of the theory of secularization. There are still a few "old believers," such as Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelare, who insist, rightly, that the theory of secularization still has much explanatory value in attempting to account for modern historical processes.¹ But the majority of sociologists of religion will not listen, for they have abandoned the paradigm with the same uncritical haste with which they previously embraced it. Indeed, some are mocking the rationalists, who made so many false prophecies about the future of religion, in the same way the philosophers before them mocked religious visionaries and obscurantist priests. Armed with "scientific" evidence, sociologists of religion now feel confident to predict bright futures for religion. The reversal is astounding when one thinks that only some twenty years ago practically nobody was ready to listen when, in the first "secularization debate," the first voices were raised by David Martin and Andrew Greeley questioning the concept and the empirical evidence, or lack thereof, behind the theory of secularization. But how could anybody listen attentively then, when even the theologians were proclaiming the death of God and celebrating the coming of the secular city?²

How can one explain this reversal? How could there have been so much myth before and so much light now? It is true that much empirical counterevidence has been accumulated against the theory since the 1960s, but similar counterevidence had existed all along and yet the evidence remained unseen or was explained away as irrelevant. The answer has to be that it is not reality itself which has changed, as much as our perception of it, and that we must be witnessing a typical Kuhnian revolution in scientific paradigms. Some may object to the use of the word "scientific" in this particular context. But there can be no doubt that we are dealing with a radical change in intellectual climate and in the background worldviews which normally sustain much of our social-scientific consensus.