Karel Dobbelaere

TESTING SECULARIZATION THEORY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

In order to test secularization theory on the individual level in a comparative perspective, the author argues that this cannot be done without linking levels of individual secularization to levels of societal secularization. This implies that we should be able to comparatively measure the level of societal secularization in the countries under study. In this article the author discusses indicators to measure the functional differentiation of the religious sub-system and other sub-systems of society (the political, juridical, educational, medical and family sub-systems). Finally, he suggests ways in which Rational Choice Theory can indirectly be integrated in a comparative study of secularization by analysing the competing groups that are implied in manifest conflicts concerning the secularization of society, what is called «laïcisation» in French.

Key words: secularization, laicization, compartmentalization, functional differentiation, rational choice theory.

One of the purposes of the International Network on Religious Studies (INORS)\(^1\), to test the secularization theory in a comparative perspective, may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, that we want to test its validity by studying several countries, including the USA, a modern society that is presented as not secularized (Berger 2001:194), and, on the other hand, it may also mean to test its explanatory power by confronting it with a conflicting theory, i.e. the rational choice theory (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Since I have suggested that both theories are complementary and may be integrated in the study of religion (Dobbelaere 2002:193–195), I will see to what extent this is possible in view of the study that we want to do.

In a working paper, defining the purpose of the INORS-workshop, the initiators of the research project stated that «secularization has three components: individual secularization, societal and organizational secularization» (referring to Dobbelaere 2002). They went on, specifying that this workshop has «to focus on individual secularization». This suggests to me three questions: First, what is meant by secularization? Second, what is meant by individual secularization? And finally, can we study individual secularization neglecting both societal and organizational secularization in our design?
The theoretical background of secularization theory

The concept of secularization refers to a process by which the overarching and transcendent religious system of old is reduced in modern functionally differentiated societies to a sub-system alongside other sub-systems, losing in this process its overarching claims over them. This definition refers of course to the societal or macro level and points out that the religious authorities of institutionalized religion have lost control over the other sub-systems like polity, economy, family, education, law, etc. Furthermore, secularization is seen as a consequence of functional differentiation and is consequently nothing more than a descriptive concept. In other words, secularization describes the effect of functional differentiation for the religious sub-system and expresses the interpretation of this experience that religious personnel had, a point already made by Luhmann (1977: 225–232): they felt that they had lost influence in worldly affairs and that a segregation was institutionalized between the so-called sacred and secular.

The functional differentiation of the sub-systems and their autonomization allows for the rationalization of the procedures and the establishment of rational organizations, like the public administration of the state and economic concerns, in which the interactions are primarily secondary, hierarchical and role oriented. The consequence of such human actions may latently produce secularizing effects. However, secularization may also be a manifest function. In the latter case, it is called in French *laïcisation* in reference to «la laïcisation» of France, a manifestly enforced process of secularization during at least two centuries by the republicans against the reactionaries with whom the Catholic Church allied. This conflict produced a profound split over religion per se in the country, on the national level as well as on the local and family level: republicans versus *intégristes*, schoolmaster against *curé*, father against mother (Martin 1978: 36–41). And the republicans created their own symbols, e.g. Marianne, which was intended to replace the catholic symbol of the Virgin Mary, and it is today in all city halls of France (Hilaire 2005:48). The laicization extended to other European countries: the changes of the laws on divorce, abortion, euthanasia and the legal marriage of homosexuals attest to that.

This allows us to emphasize that secularization is not a mechanical, evolutionary process. It is quite often the result of conflicts over particular issues in which opposing movements with religious, a-religious or anti-religious ideologies are involved. However, the changes, in one or the other direction, are not always the result of manifest actions, as I have already suggested. They may also come about as the result of certain actions which latently produce a secularizing effect. A good example of this is the introduction of the clock. The development of science, industry and the expanding trade, from the 12th century on, could not be regulated anymore by the time sequence of the monasteries which was being indicated by bell ringing. One needed a more accurate measure of time which was ultimately achieved by the invention of the clock, at the turn of the 14th century, which imposed a secular time order from the highest tower in the city so that it could be seen by every one. Canonical time lost its significance and time was also dissociated from God-given nature, which it had through, for example,
Once the clock started regulating time it became controlled by men and dissociated from the religious time cycle. In the 19th century, the railroads would impose a strict coordination of time and later on it was done by the radio.

Having discussed the elements of the theoretical background of secularization theory which we need to develop our arguments, let us now turn to the micro level.

**Individual secularization**

Applying on the individual level the definition given to societal secularization, we arrive at the following one: individual secularization means that the *religious authorities* have lost control over the beliefs, practices and moral principles of individual persons. It refers to a partial or total abandonment of institutionalized religion. If one accepts this, then individual secularization does not mean religious decline per se or the decay of individual piety and practices, since central in the definition is the reference to the loss of power of the religious authorities of institutionalized religions to control individual religiousness. Consequently, the continuing individual religious sensitivity is not a falsification of secularization theory, it confirms it and so does religious bricolage.

This means that in a questionnaire measuring secularization, we need questions about institutionalized religious beliefs, practices and moral principles which will allow us to study the normative integration of the individual in institutionalized religion. Furthermore, we need questions about spirituality and religious piety, and about popular religion. More technically now, a question «do you believe in God?» can only point out a certain belief in a transcendence, but it should be combined with an other question where interviewees are able to specify their conception of God with the help of indicators such as: a «god with whom I can have a personal relationship», a «spirit or life force» or a «supernatural power», the «God within», «I don’t believe» and «I do not know what to believe». This allows us to see to what extent their beliefs are in conformity with institutionalized religion. I give these only to specify my thoughts, as an example without having the pretension to have formulated a good question. And in that vision we could not only ask if they believe in a life hereafter (yes, no, I do not know); but we must allow the interviewee to specify this belief. We should not only have questions about churchly practices, but also about popular religious practices, like the use of the bible (opening it by chance to know what God expects of us), lighting candles, the use of holy water or water from holy sources at pilgrimage sites, etc. And the same is true for moral questions. However, as far as morality is concerned, we should not limit ourselves to questions about sex, but introduce questions about important moral issues of our times. The problem we will meet is to find equivalent questions for people of different religions. Thus in a comparative study of countries with a pluralist religious population, we will have to specify the population we want to interview and to look for equivalent questions.

If we want to do a study of «individual secularization» with such a questionnaire, what is the point in suggesting that we are studying secularization? We could also call
it a study of religious change in comparative perspective and try to explain the change
from institutionalized religiosity to spirituality by looking for an explanation of the
decline of institutionalized religiosity and the rising trend towards spirituality.

In a recent paper, Inglehart (2006) has proposed «a revised version of secularization
theory that emphasizes the extent to which people have a sense of existential security
– that is, the feeling that survival can be taken for granted» (the same theory is elabo-
rated in Norris and Inglehart 2004). He explains the systematic erosion of the institu-
tionalized religious practices, values and beliefs in post-industrial nations by pointing
towards the diminished need for existential security, since «for the vast majority of the
population, the prime appeal of religion was that it helped them to cope with existential
insecurity» (Inglehart 2006:1). Such an explanation could be tested in a comparative
perspective, but, why call this a revision of the secularization theory? The terms secu-
larization «thesis» and «theory» are used interchangeably in his paper suggesting that
secularization is used in a very broad sense, i.e. meaning the decline of religion. I have
nothing against revisions of the secularization theory, but then it should be carefully
linked to the propositions of the secularization theory if we want to call it a revision of
the secularization theory. More, Inglehart’s explanation of the religious decline in post-
industrial societies could be tested in a comparative design, and we could do so,
although I am afraid that research data from «post-industrial nations» do not reveal that
the most insecure social strata represent the lowest «religious decline».

All this suggests that we should be very careful with the use of the term seculariza-
tion and that we have to ask ourselves how to make sure that our study will be a test of
secularization theory, to the extent that we want that of course. In order to do that, I
suggest that we link the levels of individual secularization to the levels of societal sec-
ularization and do this in two ways: is there a positive relationship between the level
of secularization in the societies under study and (1) the levels of individual secular-
ization as defined above, and (2) compartmentalization on the individual level. If we
want to do that, then we should have a sample of countries with different levels of soci-
etal secularization.

Compartmentalization

Societal secularization may indeed have had an impact on the way individuals them-
soever view the relationship between religion and the other spheres of life: the educa-
tional, the economical, the juridical, the familial, the medical, the political and the sci-
entific. The question here is: do people think that institutional religion should inform
these so-called profane sub-systems, or consider that the latter are autonomous and that
any interference of religion in these sub-systems should be rendered void and disal-
lowed? The secularization-in-mind I am pointing at, I call, compartmentalization.

In a survey of 12 342 interviewees in eleven Western and Eastern European coun-
tries the measurement of compartmentalization was based on the views of the inter-
viewees about the relationship between church and state, law and religion, religion and
education, and on their acceptance of financial support for religious schools and reli-
140
gious bodies (Billiet et al. 2003:141–142). The major result from the multi regression analysis was that people with a high commitment to their church think less in terms of secularization and are much less opposed to the impact of religion on the other sub-systems than persons with none or a low degree of commitment to a church. The latter had the highest degree of compartmentalization and were more prone to prevent secular institutions from being affected by religious influences. The relationship was not perfect and there are examples that make that clear. Members of the Catholic Church initiated functional differentiation between the Church and the political sub-system in Spain, since they considered the alliance of the Church with the Franco regime as detrimental to the Church and its mission. In Belgium, France and the Netherlands, individuals not or only minimally integrated in the Church choose Catholic schools for their children since studies have indicated and/or public opinion suggests that the discipline, the level of the studies and the supervision are «better» in Catholic than in State schools.

Returning to the study I was referring to, the researchers did not find differences between members of the different traditional Churches as far as compartmentalization is concerned (Billiet et al. 2003:152–153), except that, in a study restricting this sample to Catholics and former Catholics, Dobbelaere and Billiet (forthcoming) found that in the religiously pluralistic countries, Catholics wanted the positions of their Church institutionalized on the societal level so that Catholic religion has an impact on the other sub-systems. They want financial support for their Church and Catholic schools, and want religious symbols in State schools. They think that religion should influence politics and that legislation on moral questions – e.g. abortion, euthanasia, marriage of homosexuals and experiments on embryos – should be informed by religious leaders. In that publication, I hypothesized that they defend their Churches’ position, confronted as they are with the standpoints of other religions, which informs them that religions do not have a uniform view on moral issues and that Protestant churches, for example, lay more stress on individual responsibility rather than seeking to impose their views on the total society. Catholics in these pluralistic countries, in contrast stress the societal level and want the position of their Church institutionalized on the societal level so that Catholic religion has an impact on the other sub-systems.

J. Billiet and colleagues (2003:142) reported that the measurement model resulting from the indicators we had used was largely factorial invariant for all countries, but that there were some substantial deviations in three countries (Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden). They suggested that country specific effects on compartmentalization might be the cause. And the measurement quality for compartmentalization we used was rather low (Cronbach’s α.56).

I report on this study to make clear what I mean by compartmentalization. Furthermore, by referring to the hypothesis formulated about Catholics in pluralistic countries, I want to point out the importance of testing the impact of religious pluralism in a country and the different impact that it may have on people from different religions. Finally, evaluating the measurement model, Billiet and colleagues also referred to country specific effects and on the difficulty of selecting equivalent indicators for all countries and religions.
How to measure societal secularization

As I suggested, we should link changes of institutionalized religiosity and also compartmentalization to societal secularization to see the effect of the latter on individuals. Consequently, if that is accepted, we should select the European countries to be studied on the basis of their level of societal secularization. And, as far as the USA is concerned, I think that some states in the USA should be selected on the same basis. Indeed, the contrasts as far as societal secularization is concerned between the states of the USA might be as great as in Europe.

This implies that we should agree how to measure secularization on the societal level. However, well informed representative specialists from the states, who may be included in the research, are needed to evaluate the indicators we select. On that basis, a final set of indicators should be selected and tested in the different countries under study. Let me make a proposal which will be heavily coloured by the Belgian situation, but, at some points, references are made to other countries too. This exercise will also allow me to specify what I understand by measuring secularization on the societal level.

Since secularization refers to a process by which the overarching and transcendent religious system of old is reduced in modern functionally differentiated societies to a sub-system alongside other sub-systems, losing in this process its overarching claims over them, I will discuss some of the sub-systems:

1) The separation of State and Church, is this constitutionally institutionalized? Are religious functionaries paid by the state? Does the state pay for the maintenance of religious buildings and is this depending on the uses that can be made of them? May civil authorities display religious symbols in public places like mangers at Christmas. Are national holidays celebrated with religious rites in which the representatives of the legislative and juridical bodies are present or are there public national rites and are religious rituals taking place at such occasions considered to be purely private (recent change in Belgium)? What is the place of the heads of the churches required by protocol? Humanist Associations in Belgium want to change the protocol since, up to now, the Roman Catholic Cardinal is the first in rank, a protocol that goes back to Napoleon. Some political parties have proposed to change the law at the end of the mandate of the actual cardinal. Are official ceremonies religious or non-religious; and if religious: ecumenical or not, and what is the place for representatives of the Humanist Associations; and where do they take place: in a church or not (there is quite an evolution in Belgium in this area)? Are the legal holidays related to religious holidays, e.g. Good Friday in Great Britain or All Saints Day in Belgium? However, in Great Britain, there are so-called bank holidays which suggest a kind of separation between church and state. School vacations are more and more dissociated from religious holidays (France and Belgium). Does the King, the Queen or the President pronounce the oath of office on the bible or with the words «so help me God». Does the President, the Queen or the King refer to God in their addresses to the nation (The Queen of Great Britain does it in her Christmas address, the Belgian King not, the President of the USA usually finishes his addresses with «May God bless you all»). It is a difficult problem...
to find valid indicators when we state that secularization is related to institutional religion. Which are related to institutional religion and which ones are religious in general and not related to institutional religion? Take for example, the reference to God on the currency (USA), and prayers said at the start of a parliamentary session.

2) The juridical sub-system: Do people have to swear an oath with reference to God, or to the bible or not; or is this optional? Are religious symbols banished by law from the court rooms?

3) The educational sub-system: do denominational schools exist and are they subsidized by the state? Are religious symbols forbidden in state schools? Are there religious classes in the official curriculum of state schools or not, or are there alternative classes of which one should be taken (e.g. in Belgium religious classes or lay ethics)? Are prayers said at the opening of the school day in state schools? Are prayers said at the commencement in state schools? Are the names of the school vacations changed dropping the religious references, e.g. the carnival recess becoming «crocus vacation» in Belgium? And are ostentatious religious symbols (crosses, veils, etc.) forbidden in public schools (e.g. in France and in some state schools in Belgium)?

4) The medical sub-system: Is abortion legally allowed under certain conditions? Is euthanasia legally allowed under certain conditions (Belgium and the Netherlands)? Are experiments with embryos legally allowed? Is the cultivation of stem cells legally allowed?

5) The family sub-system: Is divorce possible by law? Are homosexual marriages legal? Does a religious marriage have legal consequences (USA), or does a religious marriage have to be preceded by a legal marriage (Belgium)?

6) The religious sub-system: Are there legal restrictions imposed on sects and NRMs (Belgium and France)?

It is clear that the elaboration of such lists should be made with the help of jurists and professionals of the sub-systems and that we have to maintain our definition that in the case of secularization the reference is institutional religion, i.e. churches, and not «religiousness», at least if one accepts my definition of secularization.

Organizational secularization

We have discussed societal and individual secularization, what about organizational secularization, or what Luckmann called «internal secularization»? Berger and Luckmann have suggested that the higher church attendance in America compared to Europe might be explained by the mundane orientation of religion in America. Luckmann (1967:36–37) called it internal secularization: «a radical inner change in American church religion … today the secular ideas of the American Dream pervade church religion». In asserting that American churches were «becoming highly secularized themselves» (Berger 1967:108) these authors sought to reconcile empirical findings at the individual level, i.e. church attendance, which appeared to conflict with secularization theories, by pointing out changes at the organizational level, i.e. within the churches. This suggests to me that in our comparison between church commitment in
Europe and the USA, we will have to evaluate the organizational secularization when we want to explain differences between church commitment in the USA and Europe. These differences should be worked out in collaboration with Americans. However, I want to stress another point taking the organizational or institutional level into account, i.e. the introduction of the rational choice approach.

The contribution of the rational choice approach to secularization theory?

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) makes three important points. It postulates a latent religiosity on the demand side (Stark 1997:8), that should become manifest by active competition between religious firms on the supply side (Stark 1997:17). However, this is only possible in a pluralistic religious situation where religious firms compete for customers and to the extent that the supply-side is not limited by state regulations, suppressing or subsidizing religions (Iannaccone 1997:40–41; Finke: 1997:50–51). State and religion should be de-regulated, in my terms secularized, to allow competition between religious firms; in the opposite case, religious firms are «lazy» (Stark and Iannaccone 1994) since there is no need for competition. Consequently, there is no opposition between secularization theory and RCT.

The problem in applying RCT in Europe is that competition between «Christian churches» is limited by an agreement between the representatives of the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches «to renounce all competitive evangelization which might express a spirit of competition between them» (Willaime 2004:32). Consequently, the competition between so-called religious firms is limited to sects and New Religious Movements (NRM) themselves and between them and the Christian churches. However, due to state regulations, for example in Belgium and France, and the anti-sect witch hunt in the media (also in Belgium and especially France), there is no fair competition. Do we have to conclude then that the RCT is not applicable in Europe? I do not think so, we should extend the notion of religion on the supply side of the RCT.

In fact religion is only a sub-category of the more general concept «meaning system». It is a particular meaning system since it has a supra-empirical referent. There are alongside religion other meaning systems, among others hedonism, materialism, and individualism. The competition in Europe is more between religious meaning systems and other meaning systems, more particularly, between religious and a- or anti-religious meaning systems. The laicization or manifest process of societal secularization attests to that. In Spain, the proposal to eliminate religion as a study subject in state schools; in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, the legalization of homo-marriages; in Belgium and the Netherlands, the legalization of euthanasia, and so on. These laws or legal propositions are opposed by the Catholic Church and in Belgium, the extension of the law on euthanasia to children also by the Orthodox Church and Islam.
All these laws are motivated in reference to religious and moral pluralism which should allow, under certain conditions, to permit individuals to follow their own conscience. It is clear that the rationale of these laws has changed compared with the rationales given 100 years ago. Then its intention was to break the moral impact of the Catholic church. However, these laws are still promoted by Humanist Associations and by political parties that are strongly influenced by members of Atheistic Lodges. Do we have a possibility on the basis of other studies to calculate the heterogeneity in meaning systems taking religious, humanist and atheist firms into account? We have to think about it and study ways in which to define the different meaning systems and how to evaluate their respective strength. However, measuring pluralism does not measure competition, a critique addressed to supply studies. And, a last question, does it add to what we might measure in a different way: societal secularization in different countries as a consequence of «laicization», a manifest process of societal secularization resulting from political action opposed by the several religious firms?

Epilogue

I have presented my vision on a comparative research design that we intend to do. It is made in the suggestive mode. I hope that these reflections will be helpful in developing an international comparative study design for a survey about religiousness and spirituality in selected European countries and States of the USA from the perspective of secularization theory.

However, I do not think that one can make a comparative study between Europe and the USA solely on the basis of secularization theory. The differences between Europe and the USA go back in time. Immigrants notably went to the States for religious reasons, i.e. the religious persecutions in Europe. Many more immigrated for economic reasons; however, religion was on their side: denominations and sects played an important role in supporting the immigrants and in socializing them in the values and norms of their new social environment. On the contrary, religion was not, as in Europe, on one side, i.e. the higher, dominant, social strata. In fact, due to religious pluralism, different denominations and sects appealed to different social strata in the USA. Religion was never in the centre of conflicts; if there were conflicts, religion was on both sides. Even now, denominations and sects are an important basis for social life in the States. This may be one of the important reasons that religion adapted to the American culture, the so-called internal or organizational secularization.

In such a situation, the Enlightenment did not have an impact in the States as it had in some European, especially in Catholic countries, where some lodges became anti-religious and stimulated laws against NRM’s. American lodges do not play the same anti-religious role as for example in Belgium and France. In such an atmosphere, the mass media are also totally different: in Europe they are critical of religion and religious bodies; in the USA, they are supportive. In the USA a vision of Intelligent Design is present; in Europe it is critically rejected. We will have to think which indicators we
should employ to measure such and other differences in attitudes towards religion and how to incorporate them in our comparative design.

Notes

1 The aim of the project «Religion in Europe and the United States: Different Responses to Modernities» initiated by the International Network on Religious Studies (INORS) is to provide systematic quantitative evidence of the role of religion in a comparative study between the United States and Europe. A first Workshop on secularization was organized at the University of Copenhagen (Denmark), May 31st to June 2nd 2006 (Homepage: http://www.staff.hum.ku.dk/pluchau/inors/). This article is based on the introductory paper presented at this seminar.

2 This list has been established with the help of Liliane Voyé

3 I do not want to suggest that societal secularization may only result from actions by Humanist Associations; religious pluralization due to the growing number of nonconformist religious movements has also had an impact on the separation of State and Church, like in Great Britain and the USA. The unchurching of a large part of the population may also stimulate governments to change certain laws to adapt them to a growing religious and moral pluralism in the population (I come back to this in section 6).

References


