

RETHINKING SECULARIZATION:
A GLOBAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE¹

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Over a decade ago, I suggested that in order to speak meaningfully of 'secularization' we needed to distinguish three different connotations:

- a) Secularization, as **decline of religious beliefs and practices** in modern societies, often postulated as a human universal developmental process. This is the most recent but by now the most widespread usage of the term in contemporary academic debates on secularization, although it remains still unregistered in most dictionaries of most European languages.
- b) Secularization, as **privatization of religion**, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics. My book, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (1994) put into question the empirical as well as the normative validity of the privatization thesis.
- c) Secularization, as **differentiation of the secular spheres** (state, economy, science), usually understood as 'emancipation,' from religious institutions and norms. This is the core component of the classic theories of secularization, which is related to the original etymological-historical meaning of the term within medieval Christendom. As indicated by every dictionary of every Western European language, it refers to the transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use, possession or control (Casanova, 1994).

Maintaining this analytical distinction, I argued, should allow to examine and to test the validity of each of the three propositions independently of each other and thus to refocus the often fruitless secularization

¹ This essay is reprinted from The Hedgehog Review's double issue "After Secularization," vol. 8, nos. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 7-22.

debate into comparative historical analysis that could account for different patterns of secularization, in all three meanings of the term, across societies and civilizations. Yet, the debate between the European and American sociologists of religion remains unabated. For the European defenders of the traditional theory, the secularization of Western European societies appears as an empirically irrefutable *fait accompli* (Bruce, 2002). But Europeans tend to switch back and forth between the traditional meaning of secularization and the more recent meaning that points to the progressive, and since the 60's drastic and assumedly irreversible, decline of religious beliefs and practices among the European population. European sociologists tend to view the two meanings of the term as intrinsically related because they view the two realities, the decline in the societal power and significance of religious institutions and the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals, as structurally related components of general processes of modernization.

American sociologists of religion tend to view things differently and practically restrict the use of the term secularization to its narrower more recent meaning of decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals. It is not so much that they question the secularization of society, but simply that they take it for granted as an unremarkable fact. The United States, they assume, was already born as a modern secular society. Yet they see no evidence of a progressive decline in the religious beliefs and practices of the American people. If anything, the historical evidence points in the opposite direction of progressive *churching* of the American population since independence (Butler, 1990). Consequently many American sociologists of religion tend to discard the theory of secularization, or at least its postulate of the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, as a European myth, once they are able to show that in the United States none of the usual 'indicators' of secularization, such as church attendance, frequency of prayer, belief in God, etc., evince any long-term declining trend (Stark, 1990; Stark and Bainbridge, 1995).

The new American paradigm has turned the European model of secularization on its head (Warner, 1993). In the extreme 'supply-side' version of the rational choice theory of religious markets, American sociologists use the American evidence to postulate a general structural relationship between disestablishment or state deregulation, open free competitive and pluralistic religious markets, and high levels of indi-

vidual religiosity. What was until now the American exception attains normative status, while the previous European rule is now demoted to being a deviation from the American norm. The low levels of religiosity in Europe are now supposedly explained by the persistence of either establishment or of highly regulated monopolistic or oligopolistic religious markets (Caplow, 1985; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994; Finke, 1997). But the internal comparative evidence within Europe does not support the basic tenets of the American theory. Monopolistic situations in Poland and Ireland are linked to persistently high levels of religiosity, while increasing liberalization and state deregulation elsewhere are often accompanied by persistent rates of religious decline (Bruce, 2000).

An impasse has been reached in the debate. The traditional theory of secularization works relatively well for Europe, but not for America. The American paradigm works relatively well for the United States, but not for Europe. Neither can offer a plausible account of the internal variations within Europe. Most importantly, neither works very well for other world religions and other parts of the world. Thus, in order to overcome the impasse and surmount the fruitless debate one needs to make clear the terminological and theoretical disagreements. But most importantly, one needs to historicize and contextualize all categories, refocus the attention beyond Europe and North America, and adopt a more global perspective (Casanova, 2003).

In my previous work, I challenged the decline and the privatization sub-theses of the theory of secularization, but I left untouched the thesis of secular differentiation. In a recent reply to Talal Asad's compelling critique, I acknowledged the need to rethink and revise also the thesis of the differentiation of the secular spheres, while insisting that we cannot simply discard the theory of secularization altogether as an ideological construct, or as an artifice of secularism (Casanova, 2006; Asad, 2003). To drop the concept or the theory of secularization would leave us analytically impoverished and without adequate conceptual tools in trying to trace the 'archeology' and 'genealogy' of Western modernity.

While the decline and privatization theses have undergone numerous critiques and revisions in the last fifteen years, the understanding of secularization as a single process of functional differentiation of the various institutional spheres or sub-systems of modern societies, remains relatively uncontested in the social sciences, particularly within European sociology. Yet, one should ask whether it is appropriate to

subsume the multiple and diverse historical patterns of differentiation and fusion of the various institutional spheres (i.e., church and state, state and economy, economy and science) that one finds throughout the history of modern Western societies into a single teleological process of modern functional differentiation.

One should further ask the extent to which it is possible to dissociate the analytical reconstructions of the historical processes of differentiation of Western European societies from general theories of modernity that postulate secular differentiation as a normative project or global requirement for all 'modern' societies. In other words, can the theory of secularization as a particular theory of European historical developments be dissociated from general theories of global modernization? Can there be a non-Western, non-secular modernity or are the self-definitions of modernity inevitably tautological insofar as secular differentiation is precisely what defines a society as 'modern'?

I fully agree with Asad that **the secular** 'should not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of 'religion' and thus achieves the latter's relocation" (2003:191). In the historical processes of European secularization, the religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutually conditioning each other. Asad (2003, 192) has shown how "the historical process of secularization effects a remarkable ideological inversion... For at one time 'the secular' was a part of a theological discourse (*saeculum*)," while later 'the religious' is constituted by secular political and scientific discourses, so that 'religion' itself as a historical category and as a universal globalized concept emerges as a construction of Western secular modernity (Asad, 1993).

But in my view, Asad's own genealogy of the secular is too indebted to the self-genealogies of secularism he has so aptly exposed, failing to recognize the extent to which the formation of the secular is itself inextricably linked with the internal transformations of European Christianity from the so-called Papal Revolution to the Protestant Reformation, and from the ascetic and pietistic sects of the 17th–18th centuries to the emergence of evangelical denominational Protestantism in 19th century America. Should one define these transformations as a process of internal secularization of Western Christianity, or as the cunning of secular reason, or both? A proper rethinking of secularization will require that we examine more critically the diverse patterns of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular and their mutual constitution across all world religions.

The contextualization of our categories should begin with the recognition of the particular Christian historicity of Western European developments as well as of the multiple and diverse historical patterns of secularization and differentiation within European and Western societies. Such a recognition in turn should allow a less Euro-centric comparative analysis of patterns of differentiation and secularization in other civilizations and world religions; and more importantly the further recognition that with the world-historical process of globalization initiated by the European colonial expansion, all these processes everywhere are dynamically interrelated and mutually constituted.

MULTIPLE DIFFERENTIATIONS, MULTIPLE SECULARIZATIONS AND MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

The theory of the Axial Age and the narratives of multiple and diverse axial age breakthroughs in various civilizations offers an alternative to the Enlightenment grand narrative of the universal progress of humanity from primitive sacred to modern secular, and from faith to reason. The question whether pre-axial tribal and archaic societies were more or less 'religious' than axial civilizations is meaningless. Following S.N. Eisenstadt, one can characterize the axial breakthroughs as the emergence of a quasi-spatial separation and sharp tension between the 'transcendental and mundane orders' (Eisenstadt, 1986; 2003; Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock, 2004; Bellah, 2005). This new dualism entails the configuration of some kind of transcendental order, morally and ontologically superior, which can serve as the basis for critique and as a regulative norm for all kinds of projects of transformation of the mundane order, from the individual self to the socio-economic and political orders.

Along with this dualism, however, there emerges also the reflexive awareness of a clear chasm between the two orders, the reflexive recognition of the congenital imperfection of human nature and of the mundane order and a explicit reflexive discourse over the limits one must observe in any attempt to implement the transcendent vision in this world. Augustin's distinction between the City of God and the City of Man is simply one of the most radical and poignant formulations of the common, yet also very diverse, types of dualism one finds in all axial civilizations and of the different types of tensions that emerged from the impossibility of bridging that dualism.

In Medieval Christendom such a dualism will be officially recognized and institutionalized in the differentiation between the *saeculum*, which although regulated by Christian norms could not lead to a state of perfection, and the monastic life of the 'religious' orders, withdrawn from the world, which following the special evangelical calling strived to attain already in this world the state of perfection. Throughout the Middle Ages one can observe all kinds of fundamentalist monastic movements, as well as sectarian and gnostic-heterodox movements, which will try to overcome the dualism either by extending the state of perfection beyond the monastery or by attempting a radical transformation of the *saeculum* in accordance with the transcendent norms.

Through multiple paths and in various ways those will be the two great patterns of secularization, which will try to overcome the axial dualism through a transvaluation of the secular sphere by imbuing it with transcendent significance. As Max Weber made clear, the Protestant Reformation will open up one of these two roads by erasing physically and symbolically the walls separating the world and the monastery and by extending the calling to perfection to all Christians living in the world through their professional calling. 'To be monks in the world,' this is the spirit of the Protestant ethic and of modern secular vocational asceticism. In Protestant countries, secularization will have from the beginning an anti-monastic and anti-popish, but not an anti-religious meaning, insofar as its rationale was precisely religious reformation, putting an end to the dualism between religion and world, making religion more secular and the *saeculum* more religious, bringing religion to the world and the world to religion. The Protestant Reformation brought down the monastery walls separating the religious and secular worlds, and opened the way for their mutual interpenetration. This marks particularly the Anglo-Saxon Protestant road of secularization. Secularization and the parallel modernization do not entail necessarily the decline of religion. On the contrary, as the history of the United States clearly indicates, from the Enlightenment and Independence till the present, processes of radical social change and modernization are often accompanied by 'great awakenings' and by religious growth.

The alternative road to secular modernity and the other way of overcoming the dualism and tension between *saeculum* and transcendent order is through the naturalization of the transcendent principles and norms, eliminating any supernatural or 'religious' reference and translating the transcendental vision into immanent projects of radical transformation of the world. This will be the road taken in much of

continental, and particularly in Latin Europe leading through Renaissance and Enlightenment to the French and later liberal and proletarian revolutions.

The great modern transvaluation at the core of all modern processes of secularization will be the revaluation of the *saeculum*, in its dual temporal and spatial dimension of 'age' and 'world,' and with it the revaluation of all human activities in the world, and particularly of work and labor, of human productivity and creativity, as the source of wealth, of progress and indeed of value itself, and of human dignity. The Protestant ethic served as paradigm of this secular revaluation before it became doctrine and ideology of the bourgeois capitalist as well as of the Marxist political economies and of all modern socialist and proletarian movements.

There are multiple and diverse secularizations in the West and multiple and diverse Western modernities and those are still mostly associated with fundamental historical differences between Catholic, Protestant and Byzantine Christianity, and between Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism. As David Martin showed, in the Latin-Catholic cultural area, and to some extent throughout Continental Europe, there was a collision between religion and the differentiated secular spheres, that is, between Catholic Christianity and modern science, modern capitalism and the modern state (Martin, 1978). As a result of this protracted clash, the Enlightenment critique of religion found here ample resonance; the secularist genealogy of modernity was constructed as a triumphant emancipation of reason, freedom and worldly pursuits from the constraints of religion; and practically every 'progressive' European social movement from the time of the French Revolution to the present was informed by secularism. The secularist self-narratives, which have informed functionalist theories of differentiation and secularization, have envisioned this process as the emancipation and expansion of the secular spheres at the expense of a much diminished and confined, though also newly differentiated, religious sphere. The boundaries are well kept; only they are relocated drastically pushing religion into the margins and into the private sphere.

In the Anglo-Protestant cultural area, by contrast, and particularly in the United States, there was 'collusion' between religion and the secular differentiated spheres. There is little historical evidence of any tension between American Protestantism and capitalism and very little manifest tension between science and religion in America prior to the Darwinian crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. The American

Enlightenment had hardly any anti-religious component. Even 'the separation of church and state,' that was constitutionally codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment, had as much the purpose of protecting 'the free exercise' of religion from state interference as that of protecting the federal state from any religious entanglement. It is rare, at least until very recently, to find any 'progressive' social movement in America appealing to 'secularist' values. The appeals to the Gospel and to 'Christian' values are certainly much more common throughout the history of American social movements as well as in the discourse of American presidents.

The purpose of this comparison is not to reiterate the well-known fact that American society is more 'religious' and therefore less 'secular' than European societies. While the first may be true, the second proposition does not follow. On the contrary, the United States has always been the paradigmatic form of a modern secular, differentiated society. Yet the triumph of 'the secular' came aided by religion rather than at its expense and the boundaries themselves became so diffused that, at least by European ecclesiastical standards, it is not clear where religion begins and the secular ends. As Tocqueville (1965: 284) already observed, "not only do the Americans practice their religion out of self-interest, but they often even place in this world the interest which they have in practicing it." Yet, it would be ludicrous to argue that the United States is a less functionally differentiated society, and therefore less modern, and therefore less secular, than France or Sweden. On the contrary, one could argue that there is less functional differentiation of state, economy, science, etc., in *étatiste* France than in the United States, but this does not make France either less modern or less secular than the United States.

When American sociologists of religion retort from their provincial perspective that secularization is a European myth, they are right if only in the sense that the United States was born as a modern secular state, never knew the established church of the European caesaropapist absolutist state, and did not need to go through a European process of secular differentiation in order to become a modern secular society. If the European concept of secularization is not a particularly relevant category for the 'Christian' United States, much less may it be directly applicable to other axial civilizations with very different modes of structuration of the religious and the secular. As an analytical conceptualization of a historical process, secularization is a category that makes sense within the context of the particular internal and external

dynamics of the transformation of Western European Christianity from the Middle Ages to the present. But the category becomes problematic once it is generalized as a universal process of societal development and once it is transferred to other world religions and other civilizational areas with very different dynamics of structuration of the relations and tensions between religion and world, or between cosmological transcendence and worldly immanence.

The category of secularization could hardly be applicable, for instance, to such 'religions' as Confucianism or Taoism, insofar as they are not characterized by high tension with 'the world,' insofar as their model of transcendence can hardly be called 'religious,' and insofar as they have no ecclesiastical organization. In a sense those religions which have always been 'worldly' and 'lay' do not need to undergo a process of secularization. To secularize, i.e., 'to make worldly' or 'to transfer from ecclesiastical to civil use', are processes that do not make much sense in such a civilizational context. In this respect, China and the Confucian civilizational area have been 'secular' *avant la lettre*. It is the postulated intrinsic correlation between modernization and secularization that is highly problematic. There can be modern societies like the United States, which are secular while deeply religious; and there can be pre-modern societies like China, which from our Euro-centric religious perspective look deeply secular and irreligious.²

It just happened that the particular, specifically Christian, Western European dynamic of secularization became globalized with the expansion of European colonialism, and with the ensuing global expansion of capitalism, of the European system of states, of modern science, and of modern ideologies of secularism. Thus, the relevant questions become how Confucianism, Taoism and other world religions respond to the global expansion of 'Western secular modernity', and how all the religious traditions are reinterpreted as a response to this global challenge.

² Indeed, in the same way as the United States appears as an 'outlier' or deviant case among advanced post-industrial societies, similarly China appears as an outlier among agrarian societies. Actually, China evinces the lowest level of religious beliefs and religious participation of any country in the world, challenging the assumed correlation between insecurity/survival values and religious beliefs and participation. On the Norris/Inglehart scale agrarian China, at least its Confucian elites, would have appeared for centuries as a highly secular-rational society. See Figures 10.1 and 10.2 in Norris and Inglehart, (2004):224-226.

The concept of multiple modernities, first developed by S.N. Eisenstadt, is a more adequate conceptualization and pragmatic vision of modern global trends than either secular cosmopolitanism or the clash of civilizations. In a certain sense, it shares elements from both. Like cosmopolitanism, it maintains that there are some common elements or traits shared by all 'modern' societies that help to distinguish them from their 'traditional' or pre-modern forms. But these modern traits or principles attain multiple forms and diverse institutionalizations. Moreover, many of these institutionalizations are continuous or congruent with the traditional historical civilizations. Thus, there is both a civilization of modernity and the continuous transformation of the pre-modern historical civilizations under modern conditions, which help to shape the multiple modernities.

Most of the modern traits may have emerged first in the West, but even there one finds multiple modernities. Naturally, this multiplicity becomes even more pronounced as non-Western societies and civilizations acquire and institutionalize those modern traits. Modern traits, moreover, are not developed necessarily in contradistinction to or even at the expense of tradition, but rather through the transformation and the pragmatic adjustment of tradition. In this respect, the multiple modernities position shares with the clash of civilizations position the emphasis on the relevance of cultural traditions and world religions for the formation of multiple modernities.

Secular cosmopolitanism is still based on a rigid dichotomous contraposition of sacred tradition and secular modernity, assuming that the more of the one the less of the other. The clash of civilizations perspective, by contrast, emphasizes the essential continuity between tradition and modernity. Western modernity is assumed to be continuous with the Western tradition. As other civilizations modernize, rather than becoming ever more like the West, they will also maintain an essential continuity with their respective traditions. Thus, the inevitable clash of civilizations as all modern societies basically continue their diverse and mostly incommensurable traditions.

The multiple modernities position rejects both, the notion of a modern radical break with traditions as well as the notion of an essential modern continuity with tradition. All traditions and civilizations are radically transformed in processes of modernization, but they also have the possibility of shaping in particular ways the institutionalization of modern traits. Traditions are forced to respond and adjust to modern

conditions, but in the process of reformulating their traditions for modern contexts they also help to shape the particular forms of modernity.

DECLINE, REVIVAL OR TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGION?

The progressive decline of institutional Christian religion in Europe is an undeniable social fact. Since the 1960's an increasing majority of the European population has ceased participating in traditional religious practice on a regular basis, while still maintaining relatively high levels of private individual religious beliefs. Grace Davie (1994) has characterized this general European situation as 'believing without belonging'. At the same time, however, large numbers of Europeans even in the most secular countries still identify themselves as 'Christian,' pointing to an implicit, diffused and submerged Christian cultural identity. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2004) has offered the reverse characterization of the European situation as 'belonging without believing.' From France to Sweden and from England to Scotland, the historical churches (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican or Calvinist), although emptied of active membership still function, vicariously as it were, as public carriers of the national religion. In this respect, 'secular' and 'Christian' cultural identities are intertwined in complex and rarely verbalized modes among most Europeans.

Yet traditional explanations of European secularization by reference to either increasing institutional differentiation, increasing rationality, or increasing individualism are not persuasive since other modern societies, like the United States, do not manifest similar levels of religious decline. Once the exceptional character of European religious developments is recognized, it becomes necessary to search for an explanation not in general processes of modernization but rather in particular European historical developments. Indeed, the most interesting issue sociologically is not the fact of progressive religious decline among the European population since the 1950's, but the fact that this decline is interpreted through the lenses of the secularization paradigm and is therefore accompanied by a 'secularist' self-understanding that interprets the decline as 'normal' and 'progressive', that is, as a quasi-normative consequence of being a 'modern' and 'enlightened' European. The secularization of Western European societies can be

explained better in terms of the triumph of the knowledge regime of secularism, than in terms of structural processes of socio-economic development. The internal variations within Europe, moreover, can be explained better in terms of historical patterns of church-state and church-nation relations, as well as in terms of different paths of secularization among the different branches of Christianity, than in terms of levels of modernization.

It is the tendency to link processes of secularization to processes of modernization, rather than to the patterns of fusion and dissolution of religious, political, and societal communities, that is of churches, states, and nations, that is at the root of our impasse at the secularization debate. Following Weber (1946:272) we should distinguish analytically the community cult and salvation religious communities. Not every salvation religion functions as a community cult, i.e., is coextensive with a territorial political community or plays the Durkheimian function of societal integration. One may think of the many denominations, sects or cults in America which function primarily as religions of individual salvation. Nor does every community cult function as a religion of individual salvation offering the individual *qua* individual salvation from sickness, poverty, and from all sorts of distress and danger. One may think of state Confucianism in China, Shintoism in Japan, or most caesaro-papist imperial cults. Lesser forms of 'folk' religion tend to supply individual healing and salvation.

The Christian *church* and the Muslim *umma* are two particular though very different forms of historical fusion of community cults and of religions of individual salvation. The truly puzzling question in Europe, and the explanatory key in accounting for the exceptional character of European secularization, is why national churches, once they ceded to the secular nation-state their traditional historical function as community cults, that is, as collective representations of the imagined national communities and carriers of the collective memory, also lost in the process their ability to function as religions of individual salvation. Crucial is the question why individuals in Europe, once they lose faith in their national churches, do not bother to look for alternative salvation religions. In a certain sense, the answer lies in the fact that Europeans continue to be implicit members of their national churches, even after explicitly abandoning them. The national churches remain there as a public good to which they have rightful access when it comes to celebrate the transcendent rites of passage, birth and death. It is this

peculiar situation that explains the lack of demand and the absence of a truly competitive religious market in Europe.

In contrast, the particular pattern of separation of church and state codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment served to structure the unique pattern of American religious pluralism. The United States never had a national church. Eventually, all religions in America, churches as well as sects, irrespective of their origins, doctrinal claims and ecclesiastical identities, would turn into 'denominations', formally equal under the constitution and competing in a relatively free, pluralistic, and voluntaristic religious market. As the organizational form and principle of such a religious system, denominationalism constitutes the great American religious invention (Mead, 1976; Greeley, 1972).³ Along with, yet differentiated from each and all denominations, the American civil religion functions as the community cult of the nation.

At first, the diversity and substantial equality was only institutionalized as internal denominational religious pluralism within American Protestantism. America was defined as a 'Christian' nation and Christian meant solely 'Protestant'. But eventually, after prolonged outbursts of Protestant nativism directed primarily at Catholic immigrants, the pattern allowed for the incorporation of the religious others, Catholics and Jews, into the system of American religious pluralism. A process of dual accommodation took place whereby Catholicism and Judaism became American religions, while American religion and the nation were equally transformed in the process. America became a 'Judeo-Christian' nation and Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, became the three denominations of the American civil religion.

The fact that religion, religious institutions and religious identities played a central role in the process of incorporation of the old European immigrants has been amply documented and forms the core of Will Herberg's (1960) well-known thesis. Herberg's claim that immigrants became more religious as they became more American has been restated by most contemporary studies of immigrant religions in

³ E. Mead, (1976); A. M. Greeley, 1972. In Western Europe, by contrast, the model has remained that of one single church which claims to be coextensive with the nation or that of two (Catholic and Protestant) competing but territorially based national churches along with an indefinite number of religious minorities, which tend to assume the structural position of sects vis-à-vis the national church or churches. Post-independence Ukraine may be the only European society that resembles the denominational model. See, J. Casanova, 1998.

America (Casanova, forthcoming).⁴ It is important to realize, therefore, that immigrant religiosity is not simply a traditional residue, an old world survival likely to disappear with adaptation to the new context, but rather an adaptive response to the new world. The thesis implies not only that immigrants tend to be religious because of a certain social pressure to conform to American religious norms, something that is undoubtedly the case, but more importantly, the thesis implies that collective religious identities have always been one of the primary ways of structuring internal societal pluralism in American history. In my view, the thesis also offers a more plausible explanation of American religious vitality than rational choice supply-side theories of competitive religious markets.

There is a sense in which both, European secular developments and American religious developments are rather unique and exceptional. In this respect, one could certainly talk, as Europeans have done for decades, of 'American exceptionalism' or one could talk, as it has become fashionable today, of 'European exceptionalism.' But both characterizations are highly problematic, if it is implied, as it was in the past, that America was the exception to the European rule of secularization, or if it is implied, as is often today, that secular Europe is the exception to some global trend of religious revival (Davie, 1999).⁵ When it comes to religion, there is no global rule. All world religions are being transformed radically today, as they had already been transformed throughout the era of European colonial expansion, by processes of modernization and globalization. But they are being transformed in diverse and manifold ways.

All world religions are forced to respond to the global expansion of modernity as well as to their mutual and reciprocal challenges, as they all undergo multiple processes of *aggiornamento* and come to compete with one another in the emerging global system of religions. Under

⁴ Racialization and racial identities has been the other primary way of structuring internal societal pluralism in American History. Not religion alone, as Herberg's study would seem to imply, and not race alone, as contemporary immigration studies would seem to imply, but religion and race and their complex entanglements have served to structure the American experience of immigrant incorporation, indeed are the keys to 'American exceptionalism.'

⁵ Grace Davie, "Europe: The Exception that Proves the Rule?" in Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

conditions of globalization, the world religions do not only draw upon their own traditions but also increasingly upon one another [see Beyer in this volume]. Intercivilizational encounters, cultural imitations and borrowings, diasporic diffusions, hybridity, creolization, and transcultural hyphenations are all part and parcel of the global present.

Sociologists of religion should be less obsessed with the decline of religion and more attuned to the new forms which religion is assuming in all world religions at three different levels of analysis: at the individual level, at the group level, and the societal level. In a certain sense, Ernst Troeltsch's (1931) three types of religion—'individual mysticism', 'sect' and 'church'—correspond to these three levels of analysis.⁶ At the individual level the predictions of Troeltsch and William James (1985) at the beginning of last century concerning individual mysticism have held well (see also Taylor, 2002).⁷ What Thomas Luckmann (1967) called 'invisible religion' in the 60's remains the dominant form of individual religion and is likely to gain increasing global prominence.⁸ The modern individual is condemned to search and to pick and choose from a wide arrangement of meaning systems. From a Western monotheistic perspective such a condition of polytheistic and polyformic individual freedom may seem a highly novel or post-modern one. But from a non-Western perspective, particularly that of the Asian pantheist religious traditions, the condition looks much more like the old state of affairs. Individual mysticism has always been an important option, at least for elites and religious virtuosi, within the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. What Inglehart calls the expansion of post-materialist spiritual values can be understood in this respect as the generalization and democratization of options until now only available to elites and religious virtuosi in most religious traditions. As the privileged material conditions available to the elites for millennia are generalized to entire populations, so are the spiritual and religious options that were usually reserved for them. I would not characterize such a process, however, as religious decline. But what is certainly new in our global age is the simultaneous presence and availability of all world religions and all

⁶ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. New York: MacMillan, 1931.

⁷ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1985; and Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2002).

⁸ Thomas Luckmann, *Invisible Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

cultural systems, from the most 'primitive' to the most 'modern,' often detached from their temporal and spatial contexts, ready for flexible or fundamentalist individual appropriation.

At the level of religious communities, much of sociology has lamented the loss of *Gemeinschaft* as one of the negative consequences of modernity. Both, individualism and societalization are supposed to expand at the expense of community. Theories of modernization are predicated on the simple dichotomies of tradition and modernity, and of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Most theories of secularization are based on the same simple dichotomies and ultimately on the premise that in the long run processes of modern societal rationalization make community inviable. But the fact is that modernity, as Tocqueville saw clearly a long time ago, offers new and expanded possibilities for the construction of communities of all kind as voluntary associations, and particularly for the construction of new religious communities, as voluntary congregations. The sect is, of course, the paradigmatic type of a voluntary religious congregation. But in the traditional theory, the sect lives in a high and ultimately unsustainable tension with the larger society. American denominationalism, by contrast, can be understood as the generalization and relaxation of the sectarian principle of voluntary religious association.

Most of the so-called 'cults', 'new religions' or 'new religious movements' assume the form of voluntary congregations, but so do the most dynamic forms of Christianity, like the Christian base communities in Latin America or the Pentecostal churches throughout the world, or the most dynamic forms of Islam, such as Tablighi Jamaat, a form of evangelical Islam akin to early 19th century American Methodism, and the many forms of Sufi brotherhoods. Even within world religions, like Hinduism or Buddhism, that have a less developed tradition of congregationalism, the latter is emerging as a new prominent institutional form, particularly in the immigrant diasporas. This institutional transformation in the immigrant diasporas is in turn affecting profoundly the religious institutional forms in the civilizational home areas.

At the societal level of what could be called 'imagined religious communities,' secular nationalism and national 'civil religions' will continue to be prominent carriers of collective identities, but ongoing processes of globalization are likely to enhance the reemergence of the great 'world religions' as globalized transnational imagined religious communities. While new cosmopolitan and transnational imagined communities

will emerge, the most relevant ones are likely to be once again the old civilizations and world religions. Therein lies the merit of Samuel Huntington's thesis. But his geo-political conception of civilizations as territorial units akin to nation-states and superpowers is problematic, leading him to anticipate future global conflicts along civilizational fault lines. In fact, globalization represents not only a great opportunity for the old world religions insofar as they can free themselves from the territorial constraint of the nation-state and regain their transnational dimensions, but also a great threat insofar as globalization entails the de-territorialization of all cultural systems and threatens to dissolve the essential bonds between histories, peoples and territories which have defined all civilizations and world religions.

RELIGIOUS PRIVATIZATION, RELIGIOUS DE-PRIVATIZATION OR BOTH?

Over a decade ago, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Casanova, 1994) challenged the thesis of the modern privatization of religion as a global historical trend both on empirical and normative grounds. We are still witnessing processes of de-privatization in all religious traditions and in all political systems throughout the world. But de-privatization is not necessarily a reverse universal global trend. It is unlikely, however, that either modern authoritarian regimes or modern liberal democratic systems will prove ultimately successful in banishing religion to the private sphere. Authoritarian regimes may be temporarily successful through repressive measures in enforcing the privatization of religion. Democratic regimes, by contrast, are likely to have greater difficulty in doing so, other than through the tyranny of a secular majority over religious minorities. As the case of France shows, *laïcité*, can indeed become a constitutionally sacralized principle, consensually shared by the overwhelming majority of citizens, who support the enforcement of legislation banishing 'ostentatious religious symbols' from the public sphere, because they are viewed as a threat to the national system or the national tradition. Obviously, the opposite is the case in the United States, where secular minorities may feel threatened by Judeo-Christian definitions of the national republic.

I cannot find either on democratic or on liberal grounds a compelling reason to banish in principle religion from the public democratic sphere. One could at most, on pragmatic historical grounds, defend the need for separation between 'church' and 'state', although I am no longer

convinced that complete separation is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for democracy. But in any case, the attempt to establish a wall of separation between 'religion' and 'politics' is both unjustified and probably counterproductive for democracy itself. Curtailing the 'free exercise of religion' per se must lead to curtailing the free exercise of the civil and political rights of religious citizens and will ultimately infringe on the vitality of a democratic civil society. Particular religious discourses or particular religious practices may be objectionable, and susceptible to legal prohibition, on some democratic or liberal ground, but not because they are 'religious' per se.

Tocqueville was perhaps the only modern social theorist who was able to elaborate these issues with relative clarity and freed from secularist prejudices. He questioned the two central premises of the Enlightenment critique of religion, namely that the advancement of education and reason, and the advancement of democratic freedoms would make religion politically irrelevant. He anticipated, rather presciently, that the democratization of politics and the entrance of ordinary people into the political arena would augment, rather than diminish the public relevance of religion. He found empirical confirmation in the democratic experience of the United States, at the time the most democratic of modern societies and the one with the highest levels of literacy.⁹

The history of democratic politics throughout the world has confirmed Tocqueville's assumptions. Religious issues, religious resources, interdenominational conflicts, secular-religious cleavages have all been relatively central to electoral democratic politics and to the politics of civil society throughout the history of democracy. Even in secular Europe, where a majority of the political elites and of ordinary citizens had taken the thesis of privatization for granted, unexpectedly, contentious religious issues have returned again to the center of European politics (Byrnes and Katzenstein, 2006; Banchoff, 2007). It is not surprising therefore that this should be even more the case in the United States, where historically religion has always been at the very center of all great political conflicts and movements of social reform. From independence to abolition, from nativism to women's suffrage,

⁹ The fact that Tocqueville uses the subterfuge of discussing the problems of black slavery and of the genocide of the Native American in a separate chapter at the end of Book I because 'they are outside democracy' shows the extent to which Tocqueville was at least implicitly aware that America was a 'racial' democracy, for whites only, and therefore far from being a model democracy

from prohibition to the civil rights movement, religion had always been at the center of these conflicts, but also on both sides of the political barricades. What is new in the last decades is the fact that for the first time in American political history, the contemporary culture wars are beginning to resemble the secular-religious cleavages that were endemic to continental European politics in the past. Religion itself has become now a contentious public issue. It is not clear yet that one should interpret such a fact as an indication that American religious exceptionalism is coming to an end and the United States is finally joining the European rule of secularization.

If I had to revise anything from my thesis today, it would be my attempt to restrict, on what I thought were justifiable normative grounds, public religion to the public sphere of civil society. This remains my own personal normative and political preference, but I am not certain that the secular separation of religion from political society or even from the state are universalizable maxims, in the sense that they are either necessary or sufficient conditions for democratic politics. As the example of so many modern secular authoritarian and totalitarian states show, from the Soviet Union to secular Turkey, strict no establishment is by no means a sufficient condition for democracy. On the other hand, several countries with at least nominal establishment, such as England or Lutheran Scandinavian countries, have a relatively commendable record of democratic freedoms and of protection of the rights of minorities, including religious ones. It would seem, therefore, that strict separation is also not a necessary condition for democracy. Indeed one could advance the proposition that of the two clauses of the First Amendment, 'free exercise' is the one that stands out as a normative democratic principle in itself, while the no establishment principle is defensible only insofar as it might be a necessary means to free exercise and to equal rights. In other words, secularist principles per se may be defensible on some other ground, but not as intrinsically liberal democratic ones.

The rules for protection from the tyranny of religious majorities should be the same democratic rules used to defend from the tyranny of any democratic majority. The protection of the rights of any minority, religious or secular, and equal universal access should be central normative principles of any liberal democratic system. In principle one should not need any additional particular secularist principle or legislation. But as a matter of fact, historically-pragmatically, it may be necessary to disestablish 'churches', that is, ecclesiastical institutions that

claim either monopolistic rights over a territory or particular privileges, or it may be necessary to use constitutional and at times extra-ordinary means to disempower entrenched tyrannical majorities.

Finally, on empirical grounds there are good reasons why we should expect religion and morality to remain and even to become ever more contentious public issues in democratic politics. Given such trends as increasing globalization, transnational migrations, increasing multiculturalism, the biogenetic revolution and the persistence of blatant gender discrimination, the number of contentious public religious issues is likely to grow rather than diminish. The result is a continuous expansion of the *res publica* while the citizen's republic becomes ever more diverse and fragmented. The penetration of all spheres of life, including the most private, by public policy; the expansion of scientific-technological frontiers giving humanity demiurgic powers of self-creation and self-destruction; the compression of the whole world into one single common home for all of humanity; and the moral pluralism that seems inherent to multiculturalism—all these transcendent issues will continue to engage religion and provoke religious responses.

RELIGION AS IDENTITY AND CONTESTATION

John H. Simpson

INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter of the 20th century sociologists wrote about the world as a single economic, political, and social place. This work differed from that of economists in the field of international trade and development, or political scientists specializing in international relations. It emphasized the totality of the world rather than sets of relations between its parts. And it eschewed unelaborated references to the world as a 'global village'.

- The world was seen as an economic system where the rules of capitalism brought about and sustained differences in wealth and power not only within societies but especially between nation-states. (Wallerstein 1974–1989).
- Nation-states were seen as societal units having legitimate authority associated with a global set of expectations and rules, formal and informal, which described and mandated the ways in which a nation-state should act in order to serve its citizenry and the world in humane ways (Meyer, 1980; Meyer et al., 1987; 1997).
- The sociality of the world was viewed in terms of a universal press for comparisons between and among the acting units of the world: nations, nation-states, and selves (individuals). The flow of comparisons constructed an identity for each unit, an identity that was reflexive, projected onto the world's stage, and revised where necessary to take into account events and changes (Robertson and Chirico, 1985; Robertson, 1992). Socially, the world was a much more complex place than the image of a 'global village' suggested.

These ways of seeing the world sociologically defined an approach to the world that was covered by the descriptor 'globalization' (Simpson forthcoming). And each way stated or implied a position on the role of religion in a globalized world.

- Religion is an epiphenomenon or a correlate of action, especially economic action, with no independent effects of its own on contemporary world history (Wallerstein).
- Secularized Western (Judeo-Christian) values point to the desiderata of a world-polity that is the normative framework for the behavior of nation-states (Meyer).
- Religion is a solution for the endemic identity crises of the world's acting units—nations, nation-states, selves—crises induced by the world having become one place where comparisons cannot be avoided (Robertson).

At about the same time that sociologists began to think globally in the ways laid out above, the German theorist, Niklas Luhmann, was developing his description of modern society (1982). Luhmann was concerned with how modern society could think of itself in a way that adequately described how the differentiated institutions of a modern society—the economy, politics, science, law, education, art, religion—worked and formed a unity. Luhmann was not content with simply recognizing the presence in modern societies of an elaborate division of labor presumptively tied together by national solidarity, common values, economic necessity or political hegemony. He wanted to know how each institution operated and whether there was commonality across the autonomous institutions of a modern society in the absence of substantive similarities in the operational logics of those institutions. The economy was not science, education was not law, etc.

Luhmann (1995) proposed that the institutions in a modern society are self-constructed by communication using binary codes. Each institution has its own code: ownership/no ownership (the economy), true/false (science), legal/not legal (the law), etc. Each institution is a social system, an operationally closed process that only exists because there is something that it is not: its environment.

Luhmann's analysis leads to the conclusion that the unity of modern societies is found in the sameness of process within its social systems: self-construction using distinctions (binary codes). The differences between social systems are found in the differences in the codes each system uses to construct itself. The legal system's code (legal/not legal) is not the same as the political system's code (in power/out of power), etc.

Luhmann's theory is a theory of modernity. As such it poses interesting possibilities for the understanding of globalization and, especially, religion in a globalized world. It is not difficult to see globalization

as the spread of institutions that developed in the modern West: the nation-state, science, capitalism, socialism, etc. Each can be viewed as systemic in Luhmann's sense, a social system diffused across the world. Each system uses the same code everywhere, true/false (modern science), etc. But is on-ground religion across the world systemic as well?

Were religion in a globalized world systemic, in the Luhmannian sense, it would be an autonomous, code-specific, communication-based social system like an economic system or a political system, something in the environment of all other social systems. But is religion a global social system? *It is if it uses the same code everywhere.* Beyer argues that that is the case (2006). In the global circumstance religion takes the form of a Luhmannian social system, according to Beyer. Beyer's turn takes religion in globalized society away from the niche of established perspectives (while not denying their validity) and places it within the broad frame of Luhmann's general sociology.

This chapter provides an understanding of identity and contestation from a Luhmannian perspective. It spells out the 'how' of identity and contestation and, therefore, religious identity and contestation in the global circumstance *if religion in global society is systemic*. The question regarding the form(s) that religion takes in the globalized world is left open, but left open as a contingency and not as an opportunity to close on a position of either necessity or impossibility regarding how religion operates in the contemporary global situation.

APPROACHES TO RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND CONTESTATION

The themes of contestation and identity cover several possible ways of developing this chapter. One starting point would be a timeline of events describing religion and conflict in the post-9/11 world, and 9/11, itself, as an event underwriting antagonism and aggression flowing from religion. Attention would be paid to the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflict on religious identities. In this framing contestation intensifies religious self-definitions that in turn thicken and escalate conflict as in the case of Sunni vs. Shi'a after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Another possibility steers analysis in the direction of observing the formation and maintenance of identities as a factor contributing to conflict. Emphasis would be placed on the role of religion as a personal or social sign that can be mobilized in the designation of sides. In this

framing identities lead to the observation of events. Empirical starting points might include the flowering of Iran as a theocratic player in the world of nuclear arms, the struggles between religion and the state in China, and the emergence of India as a scene of rapid development overlaid on a religiously justified stratification system. In each case the distribution and character of religious identities within systems of power and exchange would be analyzed as sources of contestation and conflict.

There are other possibilities. Developing the chapter from the history of religion perspective would lead to an analysis of texts and practices. The meaning of individual and social identities within traditions would be sought and relations (or a lack thereof) established between identities and the doctrines, ethics, rituals, practices, poetry, stories and theatrics of a tradition as they are brought to bear on difference and contestation.

The possibilities described above share a common methodological strategy: finding correlations between conflict and identity. Properly applied, the methodology would enhance (albeit in a conventional way) our understanding of religious identities and conflict in the current situation. But it would also leave a number of matters up in the air.

Chief among these is the question of how useful identity is as a term that can be constructively deployed to guide the empirical search for clues which yield insight and understanding of the role of religion in today's world. To be constructively deployed a term must be above interpretive suspicion. Identity and its theoretical 'chums' (self and I) fail that test according to some engaged in the modern/post-modern debates (cf. Lash and Friedman, 1992: 1-3).

Contestation is also a problematic word. What it signifies is not at issue. The difficulty lies in the ameliorative burden assumed by those who think about contestation. Contestation and its sibling, conflict, are usually seen as problems to be solved, things to be overcome: the contradiction of labor and capital, social order vs. social disorder, irrational (unresolvable) discourse vs. rational discourse. And from Marx to Parsons to Habermas the solutions that are offered are utopian or descriptively flawed (societies don't operate like that): the revolutionary disappearance of capital, value consensus, ideal speech situations (Marx and Engels, 1967; Parsons, 1971; Habermas, 1984).

Is there a way of theorizing contestation and conflict so that it has more conceptual adequacy, more fit with the complexities of the contemporary situation than the counter-factual solutions of the

modern theorists? Finding that way may also transfigure the meaning of identity. What we are looking for, then, is insight into two sets of words that may intermesh and can be used to construct a version of the contemporary phenomenon of conflict anchored in religion: 'I', 'me', 'you', 'they', 'self', 'other', 'identity', and 'competition', 'struggle', 'conflict', 'controversy', 'contestation'.

I, ME, YOU, AND THEM

Within Western thought words in the 'I', 'me', 'you', etc. set congeal in a pattern where self and its component units, I and me, are set off in fundamental division from you and them, the other. Identity is the set of properties associated with self and other. The idea of agency supplies movement and action to the self-other pattern and with it comes another fundamental division. Does the source of an act lie within the self (the self as an agent for itself) or does it lie within the other (the self as an agent—willing or unwilling—of the other)?

Answers to that question crosscut long-standing religious and secular perspectives in the West. Two polar strands in the Western (Latin) Christian tradition address the matter of God and the self. One emphasizes the immanence of God in an ordered world and the other stresses God's transcendence (cf. Swanson, 1968; 1986).

Where the first theme (the immanence of God) dominates, the self exists as part of a natural order infused by the supra-naturalness of God. The self's (or soul's) end is harmony with the natural order and God. The acts and properties of the self come from the effects of the natural order and God interwoven with the I. Immanence limits the agency of the self. Harmony with the good is acquired or restored through the penetrating, transforming force of benevolent immanence. The self and its identity are in the final analysis constituted by the Other (Aquinas, 1965: 152).

An emphasis on the transcendence of God, on the other hand, underwrites the agency of the self and limits the constraints of externalities on the 'I'. The 'I' comes into relationship with God by choosing the good that God is and recognizing the force of benevolent immanence. The acts and properties of the self flow from the expression of internalities and their contingent relationships with the natural order and transcendent goods. The self moulds itself and its identity through choice and recognition within a divinely ordered chain of being (Calvin, 1960: 35).

Secularization replaces an immanent or transcendent god with a mundane structure or force thereby changing the nature of the ultimate other in the self/other relationship, and also shifting the possibilities for the 'I'. As the age of faith subsides, in one version of European rationality, the 'I' becomes the source of its own being. Its judgments—cognitive, aesthetic, moral—order the world without any necessary reference to a divine horizon (Löwith, 1964).

The self is an agent for itself within a physical world where metaphysics is a self-achieved transcending construction of the 'I'. The 'need' for metaphysics may disappear altogether. The remembered/imagined presence of the other may be a 'hell' that malignantly constrains or deforms the ego (Sartre, 1956). Salvation becomes therapy, the neutralization of the image of the hellish other in order to form a space for the 'I' where there is freedom, authenticity, and security.

Secularization not only underwrites the construction and repair of the self as an agent for itself in a world where everything proceeds as if there were no God. It also (and, perhaps, more famously and notoriously) spins out a self that is an agent of the purposes of mundane structures that transcend the self. Here we find the modern world of institutional differentiation and bureaucracy, a world that embeds the self in the rules and procedures of compelling contexts that run from laboratories of science to death camps ('I was only following orders'), from the offices and agencies of democracies to the organization of totalitarianism, and from the firms and markets of capitalism to the welfare state and the state-planned economy.

Transcended by the forces and structures of modernity, the self is an agent or even tool of history. The frame of pragmatic progressivism attributes a better state of things (if only for the moment) to history's formation of selves equipped to muddle through and reform the present. In the frame of revolution, the self is channeled and submerged in a collective movement that imagines a best world brought into being by disciplined practice, practice that will solve the problems of the present by transforming its structures. In either case (reform or revolution) the self is not an agent for itself.

Viewing the self/other duality from the perspective of agency and the secular/non-secular distinction points to a constant and a variable. The self/other difference is common to both the age of faith and its secular successor. What changes across the faith/secular divide is the source of reflexivity (the self as agent for itself) and the source of asymmetry (the self as agent of the other). Where the divine horizon recedes, only the

naked 'I' or mundane, contextual other is immanent in the thoughts and acts of the self. Transcendence is self-transcendence without the aid of 'bell, book, and candle'. As the agent of another, norms, rules, procedures, and models of practice infuse and direct the self from an earthly outside, not from the starry heavens above.

The fracture adduced above, the faith/secular divide, is more complex than either the progressive or revolutionary views of history admit. Their deep structures embed the notion of linear change. The past (an age of faith) is left behind and a future where humanity acts for itself—the source of inspiration for change—becomes the present. Some hold the converse of that view. Linear change occurs but rather than undoing faith it overcomes the disappearance of the divine horizon and re-enchants the world (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

In either case the linear view is underwritten by the resolution of a contradiction and, thereby, the achievement of a new unity. The tension between the presence of a divine horizon and the Promethean urge is resolved by the unity of a new world without God or by the unity of a *late modern* world where God is the measure of all things for some (Simpson, 1992).

How many flowers are there in the garden of modernity? Linear views say, 'Either roses or lilies, but not both.' Unity requires overcoming difference. *E Pluribus Unum!* But what if the assignment is to think and do a world of persistent difference, a world where there is a divine horizon for some and only a human reference for others, a world of myriad otherness, a world of diverse expertise, a world of thick political, social, and economic complexity: a world where there are not only roses and lilies in the garden side by side but cactus and hibiscus, pansies and dahlias, gardenias and skunk cabbage, etc. as well?

How do we think this world? Where is there unity in a world of unfathomable diversity, a world where difference is resolved by creating more difference and never overcome by destroying difference in the name of unity? Where are the 'I', 'me', self, and identity in this world and how does religion affect them?

THE LUHMANNIAN TURN

According to the social theorist Niklas Luhmann, the world of difference and otherness, our world, can be theoretically grasped. But only where value consensus, ideal speech situations, counterfactual utopias, and

the post-modern sensibility that unconnected difference reigns are bid farewell and a new array of concepts or new uses of familiar concepts are welcomed into the world of theory. Thus, Luhmann writes about observation, operation, information, communication, system/environment, autopoiesis, self-reference, attribution, and expectation among other things (1995). Familiar terms such as role, identity and conflict are folded into a new theoretical apparatus that both qualifies and expands their meaning.

Luhmann's account of modernity ventures far beyond the bounds of classic sociological thought in order to retrieve answers to problems that for him point to dead ends in understanding or beg questions about the sufficiency of received positions. For example, the theme of this chapter, "Religion as Identity and Contestation", could easily be explicated and analyzed within the long-standing symbolic interactionist tradition of American sociology whose immediate roots are traced to George Herbert Mead (1934). The grand question is: What is the relation between the individual (and her/his identity as a self) and society? How is the society/individual duality resolved? How in other words is the universal (society)/particular (individual) problem solved in this case so that one can see society in the individual and the individual in society without contradiction? How can the whole (society) appear in a part (individual)?

Mead located the difference between the individual and society within the individual as the difference between personal and social identity. Thus, individuality was not simply an individual's own performance based on self-reflection. It included the social as well. But this theoretical maneuver, as Luhmann notes, merely repeats the doubled paradigm of individual and society within the individual and therein lies a problem:

The 'universal' is reconstituted as the 'social'; the world is given through others. This may be advantageous heuristically, but the question of how the I relates to the universal and how the I becomes universal are not carried one step further by it (Luhmann, 1995: 260).

The problematic absence of how the 'I' relates to and becomes the universal in symbolic interactionism is only one of many 'irritants' provoking Luhmann's theoretical turn, a turn that begins with a simple assumption: "The following considerations assume that there are systems" (1995: 12). As Luhmann notes, this is not a position of epistemological doubt, a thinking away of (nearly) everything in order

to assert the foundational idea of systems. Neither is it purely analytic. The concept of system refers to something that is in reality a system and whose statements can be tested against reality.

But why systems? Here Luhmann employs a conventional device, the time-line of pre-modern, modern, and beyond, and the shifts that occurred in the West's self-understanding as transitions and transformations came to pass. By the turn of the 20th century there were two problems that needed to be solved if the epistemic crisis in the West's self-understanding were to be overcome: the problem of social integration in a modern society and the problem of rationality. These are intertwined problems. What the social is and how it forms a unity can only be determined if there is an adequate (rational) way of thinking the social. Structure (the social) and semantics (rationality as meaning) are two sides of the same coin (Luhmann, 1998: 1).

THE PROBLEM OF STRUCTURE

The traditional Western view of society stretching back into antiquity saw it as whole composed of parts (people). It was both an aggregate totality (the sum of the parts) and a unity of the whole that was more than the sum of the parts. The question is: How is unity achieved on the level of the parts if unity is more than the sum of the parts?¹

Living together required people (parts) to recognize the whole in which they lived and live their lives according to that knowledge, thereby, expressing human nature and the unity of the whole on the level of its parts (people). This perfect model of society was, however, subject to general imperfection and, therefore, disunity. Knowledge could be compromised by error and wrong things could be willed.

The problem of the unity of the whole was solved by differentiating dominant and dominated parts. Dominant parts were vested with correct insight and will and were, thus, able to represent the whole within the whole and, thereby, guarantee the unity of the whole. Not so vague traces of this model are still found in dictatorial and totalitarian polities.

By the 18th century in the West the parts/whole model had taken the humanistic turn. The figure of humanity defined the universal. The

¹ Luhmann's review and critique of Western parts-whole thinking appears in 1995: 5-7.

part (an individual) became universal by expressing humanity. Debate raged about the form in which humanity had to be present: reason, moral law, education, the state? The sense of corruptibility disappeared and freedom from domination was mooted as the basic condition of the unrestricted presence of the universal (humanity) in the particular (the individual). This, of course, is easily recognized as the world of Enlightenment humanity, a world where the universal could be expressed by and through the self in freedom.

But whose self? Was every particular (individual) clothed with freedom to express the universal? The differentiation of dominant and dominated parts in the stratified societies of feudalism and early modernity had assigned freedom to the dominant stratum whose self-representation guaranteed the presence of the universal and the unity of the whole. By the end of the 18th century, that stratum—the nobility, the aristocracy and the Church—had been successfully challenged if not undone by democratic revolutions and the correlative appearance of the differentiation of society based on function.

The idea of a division of labor based on specialization and expertise was clearly identified in the latter part of the 18th century. At the same time the democratic revolutions of the West assigned freedom to all parts of the whole. The free self, the self ennobled by democracy and in possession of rights, was everywhere in principle. But unlike the dominant persona of (diminished and disappearing) stratified societies or the (bourgeois) self of Enlightened humanity, the free, democratized self was doubly constrained as the 19th century unfolded.

- In the context of societal differentiation the free self could not represent the whole because the socio-logic of the whole was obscured by incommensurate parts that could only represent themselves and only be represented by themselves.
- The presence of universal freedom in the self-as-humanity and its possibilities for expression were limited by the asymmetries of the emergent orders of modernity. Labor was not capital. Science was not folklore. Some but not others were full citizens.

The myriad struggles within the Western world of the 19th and 20th centuries for freedom from something and the struggles that emerged in the late 20th century and early part of the present century for freedom to be something/someone exemplify and underscore the contradiction

of freedom and the asymmetries of power in modernity. And that contradiction provokes the question of the unity of the whole or, in more conventional sociological language, the question of societal integration in the circumstance of difference.

The conventional answers to that question adduce (among other things) preexisting similarities in a society (religion, language, etc.) that hold things together as differentiation proceeds, a widespread sense of interdependence, trust and obligation, common values that can be articulated with differences in action to provide a sense of unity, or the unity of consensus achieved by reasonable agreement. But these answers lack force. On the logical side, they tend to be tautological and assert the consequence: (a) in order to exist complex societies must be integrated (have ascribed similarities, interdependence, trust, etc.); (b) societies do exist; (c) therefore, there is societal integration.

On the sociological side, the answers claim the existence of integration among the complex divisions of modern society—its groups, organizations, corporate bodies—without providing a general theoretical description of how diverse social units within a modern society operate and the implications that has for societal integration. Luhmann refers to this situation as theory deficit and the notion of social systems is designed to overcome that deficit (1998: 5).

THE PROBLEM OF SEMANTICS²

Having pointed to the deficit in the West's self-understanding of the structure of its sociality, Luhmann peers at the other side of the structure/semantics distinction: the history of the dissolution of the European tradition of rationality, a tradition that was marked by a continuum connecting the observer in the world with the world. Assuming a rational observer, the tradition focused on the convergence between thought and being and action and nature. Intelligence was directed toward things where the totality of things and the finality of movement "... carried what happened in the world" (Luhmann, 1998: 23). Whatever happened was manifested in a visible order and/or attributed to the knowledge and will of the Creator.

² See Luhmann 1998: 22–29.

Where the classical European tradition of rationality was concerned with convergence, it operated by drawing distinctions; generalized as being the difference between thought and being, and that between action and nature. The unity of rationality was guaranteed by the presumption that the world was ordered in such a way that there was a correspondence between the sides of the distinctions. Thought reflected being; being could be thought. Action was in agreement with nature; nature could be molded by action. Where thought was not in accord with being or action was unnatural, there were mistakes and errors that could be remedied by reason.

By the 17th century, the increasing structural complexity of the West and the arrival of printing led to truth 'wars' and skepticism about a universally valid rationality. The 18th century belief in reason adduced distinctions but distinctions that no longer converged. The Enlightenment drew a line between the rational and the irrational. Specialized rationalities emerged. They begged the questions: Was everything that was not within the bounds of a specialized rationality (for example, things outside the scope of emerging modern science) a mistake, an error, a misspecification, inconsequential or, simply, irrelevant? In this situation rationality does not guarantee the unity and certainty of a worldview. Rather it divides the world in a way that cannot be remedied within the scope of its own terms.

Since the 19th century we have become accustomed to working with distinctions without raising the question of the unity of a distinction, according to Luhmann. Countless explicit distinctions serve as opportunities with options for the attribution of rationality (and in many instances what might be called 'entanglement with social movement attributions of politicized meanings') to one side or the other: mind/matter, sacred/secular, state/society, individual/collective, faith/reason, labor/capital, war/peace, women/men, etc. Rationality itself becomes a component of a distinction whose other side is something irrational: pleasure, fantasy, imagination.

Luhmann concludes that the one-sidedness of attributions of rationality enervates modern society's ability to reflect on its own unity. Furthermore, to the extent that empathy and the other's reactions are incorporated into decisions on action, the idea of the unity and certainty of a worldview is undermined (Luhmann, 1998: 25–6).

UNITY IN A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Can modern societies think themselves in a way that satisfies the 'canonical' criteria of unity and rationality in a world of difference, discontinuity, and specialization? Luhmann's answer is 'yes', and it is based on four conceptual devices: the observer, loss of symmetry, distinctions, and re-entry. Luhmann retrieves the position of the observer in European thought in order to associate the observer with the loss of symmetry, the making of distinctions, and the re-entry of distinctions:

Despite the emphasis of world unity as nature or as creation, and despite the theories of the representation of being in thought or the imitation of nature in artistic action, a "break in symmetry" was inevitable in the Old European cosmology. A remarkable position was reserved for the observer. The rationality continuum was thought to be asymmetrical. The preferred position in the building of the world, containing both itself and its opposite, was that of humanity (1998: 31).

The break in symmetry occurs where an observer makes an observation, draws a line creating a distinction, one side and another side, and there is re-entry. So with the re-entry of the distinction thought/being into itself on the thought side, the observer is able to handle being because the difference between thought and being is available. With the re-entry of the distinction humanity/world into itself on the humanity side humanity becomes the constructing observer of the world. The figure of humanity as the universal that could be manifested in a particular (the individual) disappears. All depends on the figure of the observer making distinctions (not finding distinctions). Reason as the discoverer and explorer of what is goes out the backdoor.

To 'concretize' and narrow these considerations for theory development, Luhmann puts the distinction between system and environment on the table (1998: 33–43). This way of proceeding uses the figure of re-entry—the re-entry of the system/environment distinction into a system—to establish and elaborate the system/environment difference. A distinction is made within the system between self-reference and external reference. The system observes (knows) itself as the difference between self-reference and external reference. That difference is the system.

The distinction between self-reference and external reference is a first-order observation. A first-order observation can be observed by the system where it is made. The system observes how it divides the world using the self-reference/external reference schema. That is

what Luhmann calls a second-order observation, an observation of an observation. With re-entry a second-order observation rapidly leads away from the unity of the world based on the convergence of the sides of a distinction and the certainty that each observed distinction represents the world or, as Luhmann puts it, makes the world visible. Far from suspending differences between distinctions in order to bring about unity, Luhmann keeps distinctions and multiplies them in order to (eventually) assert the unity of society.

With an increase in the order of observation (second-order, third-order, etc.) and the successive reentry of each observation into the system side of the system/environment distinction, the system rapidly digs deeper into itself and builds its complexity. The side of the primal distinction where reentry does not occur—the environment in the system/environment distinction—is, paradoxically, the inchoate side of the distinction that enables the system to build itself. The environment is not the system yet without that which it is not, the system cannot be (itself). To distinguish, to draw a distinction and indicate or point to one side or the other cannot occur unless there is an 'is' and an 'is not'—a distinction in this case without any ontological connotation.

The system operatively excludes itself from the environment and includes itself (in itself) at the same time by observing and basing its difference from the environment on observations that are internal to itself. Thus, a system (that always means the system/environment distinction) constructs itself. It is autopoietic, self-making. It makes attributions to things and holds expectations for things that are its constructions: attributions and expectations that would not 'be' without the environment from which the system distinguishes itself (and, thereby, becomes a system) and that it never knows as a thing-in-itself. The system can only operate with its own constructed attributions and expectations, memories and dreams, stories and rules, things that would not be without the system/environment difference that gives the system its identity.

Having laid out an argument regarding the course of Western rationality and modern society's inability to reflect on its own unity, Luhmann turns to the system/environment distinction and the notion of self-making: the autopoiesis of a system constructing itself by distinguishing itself from its environment. How does this turn enable modern societies to reflect on their unity, a unity that must be conceptualized in the circumstance of difference, specialization, and incommensurability? How can unity and difference hold at the same time? According to Luhmann they can.

- There is unity because all of the social systems that make up a modern society are the same in terms of how they operate. All of them construct themselves by distinguishing themselves from their environment.
- There is difference because each social system uses its own set of distinctions to construct the difference between itself and its environment.

Luhmann's proposed solution to the deficits in the West's understanding of its unity and rationality, his unfolding of the idea of social systems, is neither an ontological solution to the theoretical dead ends he finds nor a post-modernist shrug in the face of unfathomable ever-changing difference.

A social system is not a thing, an existing object with substance, something that one finds and then makes decisions about. Nor is a social system a mirage or false harbor, a stable illusion of place, comfort, and safety in the midst of ungraspable, chaotic difference. A social system is (without any ontological connotation) "...communications and their attribution as actions" (1995: 174).

UNFOLDING COMMUNICATION³

Communication can occur where alter and ego must take one another into account in doing whatever they do. This is the circle of double contingency (Parsons and Shils, 1951:16). In order to act each must 'read' and respond to what the other is doing. But communication according to Luhmann is not simply the transmission and receipt of a message, a gesture or linguistic event that evokes a response. Communication is a process of selection and, thereby, also, a process of rejection or leaving something (known or unknown) aside.

- There are three moments of selection in communication: information, utterance, and understanding. The direction of communication is from alter to ego.
- A communication ends or is closed off when ego understands via interpretation based on meaning what alter has uttered. Interpretation based on meaning is selection.

³ See Luhmann, 1995: 137-75.

- Alter's utterance is a choice that assumes a selection of information. An utterance is not a selection of information, but a selection by alter, based on the information that has been selected.
- The unity of communication is the selections of information, utterance, and understanding and where any selection is missing there is no communication.
- Where there is communication and an attribution (an action in Luhmann's terminology) by ego to alter of the meaning to ego of alter's utterance there is a social system.

The re-entry of distinctions (every selection assumes a distinction) into a system and its self-observation is a social system where distinctions and self-observations are the 'special' types of distinctions and re-entry that have been described as communication and attribution. Social systems are moments in time that rise and fall on the basis of selections and attributions. There is no guarantee from one moment to the next apart from the selections of information, utterance, and understanding (communication) and attributions (action) that there are social systems.

Given that there are two sides to any distinction and that one side or the other can be designated as the side included in the system and that there is no guarantee that one side or the other will be designated as such, social systems from one perspective are achieved 'miracles' dependent on the re-selection of one side again and again. Social systems, then, are neither necessary nor impossible. They are contingent on the always-probable selection of one side of a distinction.

REALITY AND SUCCESS IN THE SEA OF CONTINGENCY

Why do social systems have the aura of objective reality, permanence, social fact, rock-fast plausibility, given-ness and there-ness? The Luhmannian answer is: One side of a distinction is designated again and again in the communication with attribution that is a social system. Here ritual, stories, wisdom, and humor, as well as the continuous repetition in their own spaces of the codes of the social systems of modernity (the economy, the law, etc.), come into play in the recall and repetition of distinctions. Without memory there would be no social systems because selections would be random. Should one or more of the selections of communication and attribution disappear or evolve

in a different or contradictory direction, a social system would collapse or no longer be what it is.

The likelihood of continuity must be viewed in terms of the likelihood of stability in communication. Continuity depends on the same side of the distinctions that are in play in the selections of information, utterance, understanding, and the attribution of communication by ego to alter being selected over time. Given that the bodies and minds (genes and experience) of ego and alter are not the same, there is an improbability that ego will understand what alter means. Furthermore, there is an improbability that a communication will reach more persons than are present in a concrete situation, especially if there is a demand that the communication remain unchanged. Reaching more persons increases the likelihood of utterance and, hence, continuity.

Finally, there is the question of the success of a communication. Success is a selection that is not part of the three selections (information, utterance, understanding) that together with the act of attribution make up a social system. There can be communication but there is an improbability that it will be successful:

Even if a communication is understood by the person it reaches, this does not guarantee that it is also accepted and followed. Rather, 'Every assertion provokes its contrary.' Communication is successful only if ego accepts the content selected by the communication (the information) as a premise of his own behavior (Luhmann, 1995: 158-9).

The aura of fact that we believe social systems have depends on a conjunction of improbabilities embedded in the selections of communication. There are no guarantees of anything when it comes to the 'existence' of social systems. Should communication cease there would be no social systems. Yet there are social systems. So there is communication, the successful coupling of selections improbable as that is, coupling that has features that are the same as the formal properties of the familiar evolutionary process of descent with modification except what is reproduced and modified in the case of social systems are words and gestures not genes and their expression as proteins.

IDENTITY, CONTESTATION, AND RELIGION

What then of identity, contestation and religion? Identity is the attribution by ego to alter of a communication. Identity in other words is

a social system. This Luhmannian way of looking at identity includes but is not limited to the case where there is a thematization (a topical selection) of the properties of a person: 'Donna is a kind person.' 'Patricia is an attractive person.' 'Are there any skilled swimmers in this group, Bob?'

Alters do not have, acquire or possess properties in any substantial sense. Under double contingency an ego having understood, accepted and attributed a communication may observe that social system, and then select information connected with his/her attribution and do the selection of utterance, thus, 'turning into' an alter. Ego (formerly alter) may do the selection of understanding and the attribution of communication to alter (formerly ego) thus 'creating' (another) social system. Where an observer attributes equivalence to the social systems—they use the same distinctions and make the same selections—the common observation is that Donna is a kind person, or Patricia is an attractive person, or the question addressed to Bob has been answered. But those are attributions not possessions, 'is-nesses' or 'havings' in any substantial or essential sense. They arise from the observed equivalence of social systems.

Like identity, contestation is also a social system. Contestation occurs where a) there is communication plus attribution by ego to alter (where there is a social system); b) the fourth selection regarding the acceptance or rejection of the communication by ego (its success or failure) designates the rejection side of the accept/reject distinction; c) ego 'turns into' alter and uses the rejection as information in a communication sequence where ego (formerly alter) understands and attributes the rejection to alter (formerly ego) thus 'creating' another social system. An observer would notice the difference between the two systems as the difference between true/false, believe/not believe, etc. but not as the difference between understood/not understood.

Communication can only occur where ego understands an utterance using selections based on distinctions available to him/her. This has far reaching consequences for contestation, which can only be based on understanding that always completes and closes communication and the subsequent selection of false or 'not to be believed' by ego regarding the conclusions reached in the selections of understanding. Orientalism is not a misunderstanding of the East by the West. It is a rejection by the East of the West's understanding of the East using selections based on distinctions available to the West.

A final word regarding contestation. Based as they are on distinctions and selections, social systems embed the probability of contestation. To select one side of a distinction and reject the other side (put it in the environment) and, thus, be autopoietic, self-making, is to affirm and reject. There is no such thing in a social system as equilibrium, the restoration of a normal state by ordering disorder and converting deviants into conformists. There is only the ongoing choice of one side or the other of distinctions that autopoietically 'creates' a social system. Contestation, one might say, in the form of selecting one side or the other of a distinction is the reason that there are social systems. Contestation is never necessary—the Hobbesian state of nature—nor impossible because Leviathan, the state, overcomes and liquidates the state of nature. It is merely more or less likely depending.

Identity and contestation are forms but not in a substantive sense. One might say that they are like the algorithms that one uses to do statistical analysis on a computer, procedures that instruct the machine to operate on data in such and such a way. But software is not data. Statistical software uses data to find answers. Social systems as analyzed by Luhmann are analogous to software. Culture provides the data that are 'inputs' into the formation of social systems. Precisely, an observer uses distinctions and the distinctions are selected from what is at hand in a culture. In effect Luhmann is saying, "You give me a distinction and I will tell you what the consequences of that distinction are when it is made (by/available) to an observer."

It's pretty clear what's going on where distinctions such as profit/loss or true/false (empirically based) are used. We have the (social) systems of a (capitalist) economy and modern science. What about religion? There are well-worn abstract distinctions: sacred/profane, immanent/transcendent, for example. These distinctions for the most part turn out to be distinctions used by those who make observations of observations, second order observers: scholars, researchers, social scientists. What distinctions, then, 'generate' the social systems of religion (as distinct from the social systems of those who observe the observations (distinctions) of religion)? What about such distinctions as Islamic/Un-Islamic, Jew/Other, Christian/Not Christian?

From a conventional perspective the distinctions Islamic/Un-Islamic, etc. have global salience. They circulate far beyond the reach of any concrete face-to-face situation as, especially, the reproductions of the media. Now, via the internet—a kind of half-way house between the

media and face-to-face situations—they have a new home with new possibilities. In some respects they can be viewed as brands that like material objects—Adidas, Coca-Cola, etc.—have global recognition and can be associated with local values that implicate choices, choices that result in a decision to buy and consume or not to buy and consume (cf. Stark, 1994).

Where and how often are these distinctions used? As 'pure' distinctions put forward in a context bereft of other distinctions (latent or manifest)? Never! The selections of understanding are always 'informed' by (that is embedded in) what can be viewed as a cross-tabulation or nesting of distinctions that are at hand. Thus, Islamic/Un-Islamic may be put forward where mosque/media is the other margin of the table so to speak. We have the 'cells' Islamic/mosque, Islamic/media, Un-Islamic/mosque, Un-Islamic/media. There are different possibilities for each of these combinations. The descriptors Islamic and Un-Islamic point to debates, life-styles, and, generally, semantic selections that advocate and underwrite various ways of being Muslim. The mosque/media distinction uses nouns of place and points to variation in the meaning of Islamic and Un-Islamic that depend on the context of utterance.

To wear or not wear the niqab is currently in play among Muslims. A press for wearing the garment as communication in a mosque advocates one way of being Muslim, although for the advocate it may be the only way, something necessary if one is not to be Un-Islamic. A push for wearing the garment as communication in the media, especially the Western media, may mark a difference between Muslims and non-Muslims and not a difference within Islam. That would be fine for the advocate of one-way-only Islam. It would also set the teeth of many Muslims on edge, those who know and believe that wearing the niqab is a historically relative practice.

From the times of the early Arab Umayyads and Abbasids to the Turkish Ottomans, the Indian Moghuls and the Persian Safavids, never have Muslim women been forced to cover their faces as a act of religiosity and piety.

Tying religiosity and piety to face coverings is a 19th- and 20th-century phenomenon started by the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia (Fatah, 2006).

Similar elaborations could be done for the Jew/Other, Christian/Not Christian distinctions using the place distinctions of synagogue/media and congregation/media for cross-tabulation. In all cases the distinc-

tions in the margins and cells of the table with re-entry (for example, Jew/synagogue/synagogue) and communication 'create' a social system, an identity and the basis for contestation where there is a selection of the reject side of the accept/reject distinction, the fourth selection after the three selections of communication.

And, of course, the analysis is not limited to the varieties of Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. There is no 'world' religion that does not encompass a practically uncountable number of social systems. Of the making of distinctions there may be no end.

CONCLUSION

What has been gained? As we gaze on a world rife with lethal conflict and contestation some of it anchored in religion, we understand that the way we view the world uses communication with attribution to make sense of what is going on. Our sense making is an autopoietic achievement, a construction of selections that is unified but, paradoxically, unified because it uses distinctions that endure in the midst of unity. The unity of a modern society is the unity of a sea of difference. Selection means that we only know in part. Wisdom means that we realize that what we know, we know only in part. That is a long way from Hegelian totalities where all could be known, everything understood, and the world perfected by Enlightened Humanity.

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