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Religion, secularization and social tensions



ABSTRACT

In the study of the process of secularization, functional differentiation, which is a distinctive and even defining feature of modern societies, is particularly important. In this sense, different sectors of society (e.g. politics, economy, education) are becoming increasingly autonomous and no longer require religious legitimacy. According to Niklas Luhmann, who approaches sociology from the perspective of systems theory, social systems such as law, politics, and economics operate according to an autonomous logical mechanism. Two years after Luhmann's death in 1998, André Kieserling published his systems theory interpretation of the sociology of religion, which was itself a theoretical milestone. Religion, Kieserling suggests, is a functional subsystem of modern society, which, like all other subsystems, is shaped by autopoietic and meaning-rich communication. Religion purports to explain, without contradiction, the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent in everyday life. Faith becomes a personal end product the power of which rests in its uniqueness and intimacy. In modern society, religion has become a social subsystem, now so complex that a separate science, theology, has been built around it.

The systems theory of religion addresses important issues ranging from meaning and development to secularization, and it turns decades of sociological assumptions on their head. It offers a new vocabulary and a fresh philosophical and sociological approach to one of society's most fundamental phenomena.

KEYWORDS

Niklas Luhmann's theory, secularization, functionalist approaches, religious pluralism, multiculturalism

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1. SECULARIZATION

1.1. The impact of secularization on the social roles of religion

Before delving into the theoretical questions, we would do well to pause and consider the increasing pace of secularization in postmodern society. We must ask, in other words, how this process has affected the roles of religion in society.

As a social process, secularization has transformed the relationship of modern and postmodern societies to religion, with religion playing an ever smaller role in private and public life, including within various institutional systems. The accelerating pace of secularization under the influence of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has had a significant impact on the role and function of religion in society.

The concept of secularization itself can be interpreted in several ways. Essentially, it refers to the separation of religion from other spheres of society, most importantly politics, education, and the sciences. Max Weber, perhaps the single most prominent figure in the field of sociology to study this process, described secularization in terms of “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*). Weber suggests that the world is becoming increasingly rational and increasingly understandable from the perspective of the sciences, while religious teachings are being pushed to the margins. Secularization thus refers not only to the decline in the influence of religious institutions; it also means the waning of religion as a social narrative and interpretative framework¹.

Émile Durkheim, another representative of the classical theory of secularization, also called attention to the waning role of religion, while the sciences and industrialization, he noted, were gaining ground in many spheres of life.

In the study of the process of secularization, functional differentiation, which is a distinctive and even defining feature of modern societies, is particularly important. In this sense, the different sectors of society (e.g. politics, economy, education) are becoming increasingly autonomous and no longer require religious legitimacy. According to Niklas Luhmann, who approaches sociology from the perspective of systems theory, social systems such as law, politics, and economics operate according to an autonomous logical mechanism in which religion no longer plays a separate role.

¹ BERGER 1967. 78–81.

The teachings of the Church unquestionably played a dominant role in social structures such as systems of government, education, and moral norms for centuries. As the process of secularization has progressed, however, these institutions have gradually lost their influence, especially in Western societies.

Perhaps the most significant event in this process was the separation of church and state,² which made it possible for political systems to function free of religious influence. This idea is one of the fundamental pillars of modern democracies. In principle, it is intended to ensure that government does not interfere in religious affairs and that churches and other religious groups do not influence decision making on the state level. The separation of church and state does not, however, mean that religion can be excluded from public life altogether, as the principle is based first and foremost on the clear division of powers and the common good.

Similarly, the sciences and scientific methodologies have become the guiding principle in educational systems. As religious festivals, rituals, and norms gradually became more a matter of personal preference than social (or even political) obligation, religious belief itself was increasingly a matter of personal choice and was relegated more and more to the private sphere.

In recent decades, however, several studies have suggested that secularization is not a uniform process and that it does not occur in all societies in the same way. Secularization, thus, has not meant the complete disappearance of religion from society, but merely a transformation of its functions and roles. While religion used to be the primary source of social norms and thus arguably could be understood as a centripetal force, today it has become dominated by pluralism and diversity. In modern societies, religion finds expression as a form of cultural identity rather than a binding belief system. In many cases, religious practices and systems of belief have lost their normative (centripetal) role and have become a matter of personal, individual choice. The decline in the influence of churches (broadly understood) does not necessarily mean the disappearance of faith, but rather has led merely to a transformation of how people experience faith in everyday life.³

Secularisation thus has had a complex and multifaceted impact on the roles of religion in society. While religion has come to play a strikingly smaller role than it used to in political, economic, and educational systems, it is nevertheless still present in various social spheres, if in different forms. It can therefore be concluded that secularization does not mean the disappearance of religion but only its transformation, especially in the areas of individual religious practice and community life. The relationship between religion and secular society will remain dynamic in the future, especially given the transformations brought about by globalization and cultural diversity.

² The most famous example of the separation of church and state was the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which stated that the state could not enact laws that promoted or hindered the practice of a religion. This principle ensures that all citizens are free to practice their religion, while guaranteeing the neutrality of the state in religious matters.

³ CASANOVA 1994. 45–52.

1.2. Theories of secularization

Theories of secularization venture explanations from an array of perspectives as to how and why religion has come to play an ever-smaller role in the lives of individuals and society. Below, I examine these theories in more detail and offer several examples.

1.2.1. Classical theories of secularization

Classical theories of secularization constitute an important part of modern sociological thought. These theories attempt to describe, first and foremost, the process by which religion and its influence have gradually become increasingly marginalized. Fundamentally, they suggest that, as a result of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and scientific progress, religion has lost much of its social weight and has become more a part of the private life of the individual, while so-called rational and science-based thinking has come to play an ever more prominent role⁴. Classical theories of secularization can be traced back to the writings of influential sociologists, such as Max Weber and Peter Berger.

1.2.1.1. Max Weber

Max Weber, one of the founders of German sociology and economics, is famous for his penetrating analysis of the interrelationship between modernity, religion, and capitalism. His theory of secularization is key to understanding the relationship between modernity and religion.

As noted above, Weber argued that secularization refers not simply to the decline of religion in society but also to the move away from religious worldviews brought about by modernization and the triumphs of rational thinking. According to Weber, religious worldviews were gradually losing their relevance as the advances of modernity led people to rely on rational approaches and scientific knowledge rather than religious explanations. Protestantism, Weber famously contended, and especially the Puritan work ethic played a key role in the development and spread of modern capitalism. In his milestone work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber showed that Protestant religious values such as the “Beruf” or “vocation” ethic and Puritan thrift were essential contributing factors to the development of modern capitalism. As capitalism emerged, religious social foundations gradually faded, and economic activities were increasingly organized according to rational calculations and market logic. This process itself was one of the main drivers of secularization, as the rise of rational thinking called into question the role of religion in everyday life. Traditional religions, which had been called upon to give meaning to human life and order to human coexistence, lost much of their influence in the modern world. People were less and less inclined to see nature and human life as guided by divine intervention or transcendental forces and tended more to understand the laws of nature and human life according to scientific methods.

⁴ HABERMAS 2008a. 93–96.

1.2.1.2. Peter Berger

American sociologist and religious scholar Peter Berger was another prominent representative of secularization theory. According to Berger, the driving force behind the process of secularization was the development of modern societies and in particular scientific and technological progress. With the advent of modernity, people increasingly embraced a secular outlook, and scientific explanations of natural phenomena and questions of social life gradually came to replace religious explanations. Berger contended that the secularization of modern societies has been accompanied by a growing pluralism of worldviews, and this has posed a challenge to religion. The emergence of religious pluralism, furthermore, has stimulated the process of relativization, and this in turn has weakened the social influence of religion.

In his earlier theoretical work, Berger emphasized the “privatization” of religion, by which he referred to the tendency towards the relegation of religion to the private sphere, while other areas of (public) life became increasingly secularized. Later, however, Berger realized that religions was not necessarily being completely marginalized to the private sphere and in many cases could even reenter the public sphere, for instance in the United States or in the countries of the global south⁵.

1.2.2. Functionalist approaches

Functionalist theories of secularization examine how, with the emergence of new institutions, religion becomes increasingly peripheral in modern societies. These theories emphasize the differentiation of modern society, meaning the dominance of rational thought and the advances of the sciences, all of which contribute to the diminishing role of religion in society. As social life becomes increasingly specialized, religious institutions lose the importance they once enjoyed and are replaced by other spheres or institutions. This process can be described as **structural differentiation**. From a functionalist point of view, secularization is a kind of social evolution in the course of which secular institutions based on rational thought take over various functions which had once been the prerogative of religion.

1.2.2.1. Émile Durkheim

French sociologist Émile Durkheim was one of the most prominent figures of **functionalism**. **According to Durkheim**, the fundamental function of religion was to maintain social cohesion and reinforce community norms.

Durkheim examined religion not solely as a system of beliefs but also as a social institution that plays a vital role in social cohesion and the maintenance of moral order. In his system, religion was understood as a fundamentally collective phenomenon. It was not simply a matter of individual belief but also concerned unity among people at the community level. Religion’s central role, Durkheim suggested, lay in the shared values, norms, and beliefs that hold society together. In other words, through shared rituals and symbols, it helps strengthen solidarity and unity between members of a community.

⁵ BERGER 1967.

In his 1912 book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim explained that religion is based on the distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane.” The “sacred” are things to which the community attaches special meanings which are reinforced through ritual and ceremony. These rituals, thus, not only serve spiritual purposes. They also promote social stability and unity⁶.

According to Durkheim, industrialization, scientific progress, and the gradual division of social life into increasingly distinct fields all contributed to the decline of religion’s traditional role. Durkheim never suggested, however, that religion would disappear completely. Instead, he believed that certain functions of religion would be transformed and would continue to exist in secular forms. People would always need a common set of values and a collective consciousness. In secularized societies, he posited, these values would increasingly come from secular sources, such as notions of human rights, democracy, and scientific rationality. Durkheim was convinced that these principles could also be used to create the social unity that previously had been founded on religion.

1.2.2.2. Talcott Parsons

American sociologist Talcott Parsons, though not a figure who introduced a separate, comprehensive theory of secularization, nonetheless had notions concerning this process which can be inferred from his views on modernization and social differentiation. His best-known theoretical system is structuralist-functionalism, which considers the functioning, maintenance, and development of social systems. Secularization plays an important role in this. Parsons argued that modern societies are characterized by the emergence of increasingly distinct, differentiated social systems, a process in which different social institutions, including education, economics, and religion, become increasingly separate and specialized. This process is an integral part of modernization, and according to Parsons, the roles of religious institutions have also changed as a result of this differentiation.

According to Parsons, secularization essentially means a decline in the role and influence of religious institutions. Parsons did not interpret this process as, first and foremost, a decline of religion, but rather as a natural consequence of the structural transformation of society. In modern societies, certain functions which were once the prerogative of religion have been taken over by various specializations, and the traditional tasks of religious institutions, such as providing moral guidance or social care, are also being performed by other secular institutions. Parsons, thus, did not necessarily see secularization as a negative process. In his view, while it may have lost much of its direct social influence, religion could nonetheless continue to play a decisive role in the lives of individuals.

Parsons stresses that religious values and norms continue to play a role in society, albeit indirectly. Thus, he sees secularization as a transformation in which religious teachings and value systems are incorporated into the institutions and norms of modern society and thus continue to live on in them.

⁶ DURKHEIM 1957.

1.2.3. Post-secularization theories

In the 1990s, classical theories of secularization began to come under increasing criticism as religious revivals and resurgent religious movements began to emerge all over the world. Post-secularization theories reassess the roles of religion in modern societies, especially in light of social changes of the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. These theories are based on critical confrontation with the fact that theories of secularization which posited a decline in the prominence and place of religion have not always been borne out. Secularization may have had a strong impact on many Western societies, but religion continues to play important roles and, in some situations, has even gained new momentum. Representatives of post-secularization theories thus also use the prefix “post” to indicate that theories of the separation between the religious and secular spheres are being rethought, since religious practices, beliefs, and institutions—far from having declined or receded—in certain social contexts have gathered new strength and even taken on new forms.

1.2.3.1. Jürgen Habermas

Perhaps the most prominent figure of this rethinking of the theoretical framework of secularization (implied in the term post-secularization) was German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas unquestionably believed that, since the Enlightenment, secularization has been one of the determining factors in the decline of the prominence and influence of religious beliefs and institutions. Religion, however, has not disappeared completely. Rather, it has rather been renewed, and modern societies must recognize that dialogue between citizens with secular beliefs and citizens who hold to religious faith must be placed on a new footing. Habermas pointed out that secular states do not need to exclude religion from public life altogether, but instead should provide opportunities for constructive dialogue between religious and secular views. According to Habermas, the “common language” is the language in which the secular citizen and the member of the religious fold can engage in debate. This is both a precondition for coexistence and also a guarantee of the integrity of democratic society. In the pluralistic world of modern democracies, each side must respect the other’s position. In other words, those of religious faith must accept secular arguments in public debates, while the secular citizen must acknowledge that religious beliefs can be a legitimate source of moral and ethical discourse. This theory, thus, seeks neither to refute nor deny secularization. It offers, rather, an opportunity for a new form of coexistence and dialogue between religious and secular values. Habermas derives this view primarily from pluralism and democratic political culture, in which different worldviews must learn from one another and cooperate.

Habermas also warns that the maintenance of rigid boundaries between religious and secular worldviews can become a source of conflict⁷.

1.2.3.2. Charles Taylor

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor offers a theory of post-secularization that explores the dynamic interaction between religion and modernity, with a particular focus on the specific role

⁷ HABERMAS 2008b.

of religion in a secularized world. The central idea of Taylor's theory is that people in the secular world live within an "immanent framework," meaning that they see the world only in terms of natural, material reality and that divine or transcendent reality is less obvious to them. This framework, however, does not exclude religious belief. It merely offers a different perspective. According to Taylor, people still feel a longing for the transcendent, which opens the way to post-secularization. This in turn implies the emergence of new, more flexible forms of religion. Religious experience is understood more as subjective and personal, and often it is not bound to traditional institutions or dogmas. This shift is part of a broader cultural trend that emphasizes the importance of individuality and self-realization. Taylor envisions post-secular society as a world in which different religious and secular worldviews coexist peacefully⁸.

1.3. The critique of theories of secularization⁹

Theories of secularization are strikingly varied and approach the decline of the role of religion from different perspectives. While classical theories have linked this process to modernization and the triumphs of rational thought, post-secular approaches offer a more nuanced picture of the position of religion in the global world today. Some criticize these approaches for allegedly overestimating the apparent resurgence of religion and ignoring the continued effects of secularization. Others contend that religion is present, but that its influence is still receding and the new forms it has taken are not as significant as before.

Secularization clearly is not a linear and universal process. It is, rather, a social, historical, and culturally context-dependent phenomenon. The more recent scholarship has increasingly acknowledged the complexity of this relationship and has focused on the dynamic links between religion and secularization.

The so-called "post-secular" theories point out that secularization does not necessarily mean the final decline of religion but only its survival in new forms. Habermas, the aforementioned German philosopher, argues that religion can continue to play an important role in modern societies, especially in public debates and moral discourses. Thus, in post-secular societies, religion can be reasserted, even if it takes on a new guise, different from the traditional forms it had previously taken.

This seems to be borne out in practice, as the process of secularization has not unfolded in the same way in all societies and cultures. While in Western societies and especially in the cultures of Europe the role of religion has declined significantly, in other regions, such as Africa, South America, and South Asia, it continues to play a prominent role. In many countries and particularly in the non-Western world, religion has claimed a stronger political role and is often closely linked to issues of national identity. This is true not only in the Islamic world, but also for other religious groups. One could think, for instance, of the political role of Hinduism in India.

⁸ TAYLOR 2007.

⁹ Due to space constraints, we cannot go into a detailed critical analysis of the theories of secularisation, so in this chapter we will focus only on the main lines.

1.4. The emergence of secularization in different cultural contexts

Research has shown that the process of secularization is not unfolding in the same way in different regions of the world. While in Western Europe the influence of religious institutions has declined significantly, religion remains strong in other regions, such as the Global South and Eastern Europe. Theories of secularization, thus, are not universally applicable, as different cultures and historical processes play significant and different roles in shaping the relationship between religion and society.

1.4.1. Western Europe

In Western Europe, a rapid and dramatic process of secularization began, and this process particularly gathered steam after the Second World War. Church attendance and religious beliefs declined dramatically, especially among members of the younger generations. The separation of church and state institutions and the rise of the welfare state also contributed to the marginalization of religion. Scientific and technological progress and the emphasis on individualism and cultural pluralism encouraged people to seek meaning and answers to their ethical and existential questions from sources other than religion.

1.4.2. Eastern Europe and Russia

In Eastern Europe, after the fall of communism, there was something of a religious revival, especially in Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism. After the collapse of the atheist ideologies of the socialist regimes, many people turned back to religion, although this attachment to religious belief and ceremony was in no small part cultural and not necessarily associated with deeply held religious belief. In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church gained considerable political and social power and reasserted its importance as a defining part of Russian identity.

1.4.3. The United States

One can observe an interesting phenomenon in the case of the United States, which, unlike many Western European nations, has always had a strong religious vitality. Although secularization processes have been underway here too, churches still play a prominent social role, especially in evangelical and Protestant communities. The role of religion in the political sphere is also important. This distinctive feature of the American context is due in part to the American tradition of religious pluralism and religious freedom, which has allowed different religious groups to flourish and compete.

1.4.4. Latin America

In recent decades, a remarkable religious transformation has been underway in Latin America. Protestant movements and especially Pentecostalism have gained ground in this traditionally Catholic part of the world. This religious dynamism should not be misunderstood as

secularization. Rather, it is part of the pluralization of religious life and the emergence of new religious movements.

1.5. Perspectives for the future

The future course of secularization will depend on an array of factors, including global political and economic developments, technological progress, and the internal dynamics of societies. While religion may continue to play an increasingly marginal role in some areas, in other regions and communities a strong religious identity may remain dominant. Given the immense diversity of the cultures of the world and the rise of cultural pluralism, the relationship between religion and secularization will continue to change, and both tendencies (the tendency toward religious faith on the one hand and the tendency towards a more secular worldview on the other) will continue to be present in modern societies. However, we must always keep in mind that the relationship between religion, secularization, and modernity cannot be understood and described as a simple one-way process, because as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and globalized, the role of religion is likely to change and religion itself will adapt to new challenges. But religion will unquestionably remain an important part of human experience, particularly in the areas of personal identity and community building. In the future, the balance between religion and secularization will determine the role of religion in society. The relationship between religion and secular society will in all likelihood remain dynamic and diverse, and this relationship will assume different forms in different regions and cultures.

2. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

One of the most important cultural and philosophical issues for modern societies is religious pluralism, meaning the coexistence of and interaction among different religious traditions. Contemporary social phenomena, including globalization, migration, and modernization, have all contributed to the rise of religious pluralism, since religious and cultural differences have become an increasingly marked part of everyday social life. Globalization has led to more and more encounters among different religious traditions, creating new challenges for societies from the perspectives of tolerance, acceptance and peaceful coexistence.

The development of information technologies (in particular the spread of the internet) has greatly facilitated the spread of religious ideas, practices, and teachings, leading to increasingly pluralized religious communities.

Religious pluralism is both a de facto recognition of religious diversity and a framework that promotes dialogue and respect across denominational lines.

Religious pluralism also extends to deeper issues, however, such as the relativity of religious truths, the relationship between faith and morality, and the role of the secular state among religious communities.

2.1. The concept of religious pluralism and its theoretical foundations

The concept of religious pluralism is based on the principles of religious diversity and the peaceful coexistence of different religious beliefs. This concept is not limited to this, however. It also

implies mutual recognition of different religious traditions and acceptance of these traditions on an equal footing in society. Religious pluralism has taken various forms throughout history and has developed in different ways in different historical periods and civilizations.¹⁰

Although there have been many examples of religious pluralism in the history of civilization, arguably the real turning point came in the sixteenth century with the Reformation. Reformation thinkers challenged the authority of the Catholic Church, and several new denominations were created, aptly dubbed Protestant (i.e. in protest). Religious conflicts erupted across Europe, which in the long term contributed to the emergence of new forms of religious pluralism. The bloody conflicts were resolved by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, when, in a spirit of religious tolerance, the different denominations gradually recognized one another's right to exist. The first amendment to the constitution of the United States of America, which guarantees the right of religious freedom, offers a relatively recent landmark in the history of religious pluralism. The founding fathers themselves stressed the importance of the separation of church and state, and this furthered the emergence of a modern form of religious pluralism. The historical roots of the concept also go back to nineteenth-century philosophical and religious thought¹¹.

According to the British philosopher of religion John Hick, a prominent theorist of modern pluralism, religious pluralism is necessary if we seek to understand differences between religions not as absolute truths but as expressions of different perspectives. In other words, different religious traditions are different expressions of the same transcendent reality. According to Hick, all religions are thus directed towards the same transcendent reality, but they find form and expression in different ways in different cultural and historical contexts. Hick thus embraces the notion that no single religious tradition can stake a claim to absolute truth. Rather, each religious tradition is rooted in the diversity of human experience. Thus, one of the most important questions in this regard is whether religious truth is relative or absolute in nature. These questions have been the subject of much theological and philosophical reflection, especially in Western thought, where Christianity has played a dominant role for centuries¹².

Thus, in practice, religious pluralism means that a society or community accepts several different religions and ensures that they stand on an equal footing in society, without any single religion being exclusive. In this sense, religious pluralism is not simply a matter of tolerance but also implies the belief that all religions have the right to exist legitimately and each has its place in society, and each religion respects the beliefs, practices, and values of the others.

One of the most important philosophical challenges of religious pluralism is clearly the question of the relativity of truth. If several different religious traditions stake an exclusive claim to truth, how can they possibly engage in respectful dialogue with one another? It is precisely on this point that pluralism differs from syncretism, which seeks to blur the differences between religious traditions. According to the pluralist approach to religion, each religion reflects transcendent truth in its own way, even if the understandings of this truth sometimes differ in significant ways. Naturally, this view does not exclude the possibility of disputes and conflicts between different religious traditions.

¹⁰ One of the most significant ancient examples of religious pluralism was the Roman Empire, whose expansion brought different peoples and religions under Roman rule. Roman rulers generally showed a high degree of tolerance for the religious customs of the peoples they conquered. The state supported many religious cults, and many new gods from different parts of the empire were introduced into the official Pantheon.

¹¹ HABERMAS 2006.

¹² MILLER 2015.

2.2. Social impact and challenges

Religious pluralism obviously has many positive social effects, but it also presents a number of challenges. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges it raises is how to reconcile different religious traditions without infringing on identity and autonomy. Indeed, religious communities often seem to fear that pluralism undermines the specific characteristics and teachings of their faith, especially when coexistence requires compromises. Another difficulty for some religious groups is that pluralism is seen as leading to a kind of relativism that may weaken the strength and solidity of religious faith.

The issue of social and political integration is another major challenge of religious pluralism. Coexistence among different religious groups often depends on the political institutions that regulate the rights and opportunities of religious minorities. The achievement of religious pluralism therefore depends on the extent to which society and the state are able to develop policies that ensure equal rights and freedoms for religious communities. Religious pluralism unquestionably plays an important role in modern political systems, especially in democracies, where religious freedom is a fundamental human right.

In secularized states such as France and the United States, the challenge of pluralism is how to manage tensions among religious communities while ensuring individual religious freedom.¹³ Religious freedom, after all, has come to be understood as a fundamental element of human rights, which means that the state must allow people to follow their religious beliefs freely and cannot interfere in religious practices as long as these practices do not infringe on the rights of others. Furthermore, religious freedom means not only the freedom to choose a religious belief but also the freedom to choose atheism.

In a secular society, the state should remain neutral in religious affairs as a matter of principle,¹⁴ but religious communities often ask for special rights and recognition, which can cause controversy and even tension. From a practical point of view, religious pluralism simply means a guarantee of social tolerance and religious freedom. Today, however, religious pluralism faces new challenges, especially in societies where religious fanaticism, ethnic and religious conflicts, and tensions related to migration have intensified.

In summary, mutual respect and dialogue among different religions are arguably in the interests not only of religious communities but also of society as a whole. Pluralism, however, does not mean the elimination of religious differences, but their recognition and respect.

2.3. The future of religious pluralism

The future of religious pluralism is closely linked to the processes of globalization and the ensuring social changes. Maintaining interfaith dialogue and mutual respect will also be essential for peace in the societies of the future. However, this will require religious communities to

¹³ This is referred to in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”*

¹⁴ This also means that the state cannot take a position on theological issues. And neutrality means that the state does not give preference to any religion, but keeps an equal distance from all of them.

remain open to one another and ready to engage in dialogue. In a sense, religious pluralism can further social cohesion by creating opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding among different religious groups. It also contributes to the protection of human rights by enshrining respect for individual religious freedom as a fundamental value. However, pluralism can also present challenges, for example in the management of interreligious tensions or the need to maintain a balance between secular and religious views¹⁵.

One of the great challenges of the future will be how different religions will cope with the growing effects of secularization and how they will be able to preserve their own identities in pluralistic societies.

3. MULTICULTURALISM

Like religious pluralism, multiculturalism¹⁶ is an important concept which also plays a significant but sometimes controversial role in modern societies. Both concepts are built on the recognition of diversity and the equality of different cultural and religious identities. In recent decades, as a consequence of globalization and migration, questions concerning the meanings, uses, and potential limitations of multiculturalism have been raised in an increasing number of countries and cultural contexts with an increasing sense of urgency, but the responses to these questions have varied. In the second half of the twentieth century, multiculturalism became an increasingly pressing issue, since, mainly as a result of international migration and the collapse for the most part of the colonial world, an increasing number of ethnic and cultural minorities emerged in Western societies. Multiculturalism, however, is not simply a social and political issue. It is also a philosophical one, raising complex problems of identity, pluralism, legal equality, and social cohesion¹⁷.

3.1. The concept of multiculturalism and its theoretical background

The concept of multiculturalism refers to the peaceful coexistence and interaction of different cultural groups within a society, in which groups from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and historical backgrounds seek to preserve their identities. The ways in which this concept takes political, social, and cultural form are the subject of considerable debate in public discourse and politics worldwide. At the theoretical level, the systems of the aforementioned Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor¹⁸ and political scientist Will Kymlicka in particular have played an important role in defining multiculturalism. According to Taylor, cultural recognition is a fundamental aspect of human dignity, which ensures that individuals and communities alike can preserve their cultural identities. Kymlicka adds that the protection and recognition of minority cultures require various legal and political mechanisms.

¹⁵ HABERMAS 2003.

¹⁶ Multiculturalism, as a political and social ideal of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between different cultural groups, became the dominant ideology in the Western world in the second half of the 20th century. In the 1960s, under the influence of the civil rights movements and globalisation processes, several countries, notably the United States, Canada and many European nations, began to introduce multicultural policies aimed at protecting the rights of minorities and promoting social diversity.

¹⁷ STEGER 2017.

¹⁸ TAYLOR 1992.

3.1.1. Liberal multiculturalism

Theories of multiculturalism draw on a variety of philosophical and social science approaches. If we want to understand these approaches systematically, perhaps the first and most important among them is **liberal multiculturalism**, according to which the individual has the right to preserve his or her cultural identity and that the legal system should offer protections for cultural minorities to this end. This approach is based on the notion that in a democratic society people can come from different cultural, religious, ethnic and national backgrounds and that these differences are not only acceptable but desirable for the enrichment of society. Critics of this theory often argue that the emphasis placed on differences can increase segregation and that the alleged rights of minority communities can come into conflict with the interests of other groups in society.

3.1.2. Post-colonial multiculturalism

Postcolonial multiculturalism, another approach to the multifaceted concept of multiculturalism, focuses on the legacy of colonialism and the identity crises that came with this legacy. Post-colonial multiculturalism seeks to critically engage with the legacies of colonialism, with a particular focus on the cultural, economic, and political consequences of colonialism. As has been often discussed and thoroughly documented, the colonial powers exerted not only an economic but also a cultural influence, sometimes forcibly spreading their own languages, religions, and value systems. This long shadow of past is still visible today, particularly in the multicultural societies of the former colonies, where the coexistence of different ethnic and cultural groups remains fraught with tensions.

3.1.3. Critical multiculturalism

Finally, **critical multiculturalism adopts a more pragmatic approach by focusing on power relations and inequalities. In contrast to liberal multiculturalism, this theory does not simply call attention to the alleged virtues of multiculturalism as peaceful coexistence of different cultural groups.** It also examines the ways in which power imbalances are created between different cultural and ethnic groups within a society. This approach considers how social, economic and political systems affect different cultures, and it focuses on how inequalities can be dealt with to create a more just society.

3.2. The social impact of multiculturalism

The social effects of multiculturalism can be studied from different perspectives, including economic development, social cohesion, identity formation, and the transformation of political and legal structures. Multiculturalism also poses significant challenges for countries at the societal level. One major sociological question is simply whether cultural diversity promotes or hinders social cohesion. Some studies have suggested that multicultural societies may be at a higher risk

of social conflict because of the tensions that can arise from interactions among different groups. Other studies suggests that cultural diversity stimulates innovation and economic growth.

Whatever the case, the impact of multiculturalism on social cohesion is now a hotly debated issue. Some theoreticians contend that cultural diversity nurtures understanding and cooperation within society, while others believe that tensions and antagonisms between different groups create insecurity. With regards to economic impact, **cultural diversity** can have a stimulating effect on economic growth, particularly in industries in which innovation and creativity have an important role. At the same time, cultural differences and discrimination in the labor market can be significant obstacles. Cultural divisions can have a negative impact on labor efficiency from a social point of view if discrimination is not handled effectively.

One of the most important social effects of multiculturalism is the development of individual and community identities. Cultural diversity poses new challenges to traditional national identities, as different groups seek to preserve their own cultural values. On the one hand, a multicultural environment can have a positive impact, since it offers individuals the opportunity to develop a richer cultural self-image¹⁹. On the other hand, it can have a negative impact, as individuals may suffer an identity crisis and may be unable to find a balance between their cultural heritage and the norms required by the majority society. Finally, from the perspective of political and legal impacts, multicultural societies are particularly affected by major changes in the protection of human and minority rights. The same can be said of politics, where responses to the challenges posed by multiculturalism may vary from country to country. It is worth noting that efforts to reconcile minority cultural customs with notions of universal human rights can sometimes lead to conflict.

3.3. A critique of multiculturalism and the challenges it poses

While multiculturalism can be beneficial in some respects in a given society, it has also been made the subject of vigorous criticism. Some argue that it contributes to the fragmentation of society by isolating different cultural groups from one another. Others go further and contend that it can even lead to a weakening of the core values and norms of the majority society if it fails to create a shared platform for different groups. The examples of France and Germany have provoked particularly sharp criticism, where the integration of Muslim immigrants has been the subject of considerable social and political controversy. Some argue that these countries were not prepared to deal with the conflicts arising from cultural diversity in an appropriate way and that this may be the reason why assimilation models have failed. The most frequent criticisms are summarized below.

3.3.1. *Social cohesion and the tensions of multiculturalism*

The most common criticism of multiculturalism is that it threatens social cohesion. Critics argue that multiculturalism weakens efforts towards integration among different cultural groups and thus encourages the emergence of increasingly parallel societies, as newcomers are not always able to integrate into the majority society.

¹⁹ TAYLOR 1992.

Ethnic segregation is becoming more and more evident in many Western European cities, and it is causing considerable tensions. Immigrant communities are often concentrated in neighborhoods where they can follow their own cultural traditions without having to maintain close links with local society. In the long term, this can erode mutual trust and increase the risk of ethnic conflict.

3.3.2. The crisis of national identity

Proponents of multiculturalism often contend that equal recognition of different cultural identities is important for minority groups. Others, however, perceive this as a potential threat to national identity, especially when the cultural values and norms of immigrants are fundamentally different from those of the host country. These kinds of clashes may arise, for example, between the values and traditions of Muslim communities and those of liberal democratic countries.

In Europe, on several occasions immigrant communities, taking advantage of multicultural policies, have used their own legal systems (notably religious courts) to settle issues which they have seen as belonging to their internal affairs. This practice, however, can come into conflict with the legal system of the given state and with liberal legal principles, especially when religious laws differ from international human rights laws.

3.3.3. Migration and integration

Multiculturalism is often linked to the politics of immigration, especially in countries that have received large numbers of immigrants. In these societies, the question of integration has become a central problem, as multiculturalism policies often have not placed adequate emphasis on adaptation to the host society and have not sufficiently encouraged immigrants to integrate.

The principle of multiculturalism and the politics on which it rests, although positive in the goals it has set, nevertheless faces serious challenges and criticisms today. The problems of integration, crises of national identity, and the weakening of social cohesion all suggest that multiculturalism alone is not sufficient for the successful coexistence of different cultural communities.

4. RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND RADICALISM

Throughout history, religion has been an important cornerstone of many societies and cultures, and it has exerted a profound influence on the lives of individuals and on social norms. Religious fundamentalism and religious radicalism are phenomena which also look back on a long history but which have been at the center of academic, political, and public debate, particularly in recent decades. These two key terms (fundamentalism and radicalism) are easy to conflate (and are often conflated in the public discourse), but it is important to draw a clear distinction between them. In the discussion below, I describe the characteristics, differences, and similarities between religious fundamentalism and radicalism, as well as their social and political implications.

4.1. Definitions and characteristics of religious fundamentalism and radicalism

4.1.1. Religious fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism is an ideological phenomenon that emphasizes rigid adherence to religious traditions and a return to the allegedly “original” interpretations of these traditions. The term gathered both meaning and strength in twentieth-century American Protestant communities, which built strongly on the Calvinist insistence on the centrality of the word of God, meaning actual reading of the Scriptures rather than reliance on (Catholic) interpretations of the Scriptures. The proponents of this approach to religion held to their understanding of a literal interpretation of the Bible and rejected liberal theological views. Later, the term came to be applied more widely to strands of thought in other religions, including Islam. Fundamentalists claim to have arrived at interpretations of religious texts and prescriptions independent of historical context, while rejecting the norms of the modern state, such as secularism and feminism. The original aim of any fundamentalism is to restore religion to its allegedly pure form, which generally means a return to (power relations of) the past. The followers of fundamentalisms are often isolated from mainstream society. Religious fundamentalism is not necessarily violent, but it does constitute a closed, dogmatic worldview that is difficult to reconcile with a pluralistic, democratic society²⁰.

4.1.2. Religious radicalism

Religious radicalism, as a radical strand of religious fundamentalism, is an extreme ideological tendency that advocates radical social or political change based on religious foundations. It often insists on the transformation of political systems and the rejection of established secular power. Religious radicalism frequently embraces the use of violence to achieve its goals and thus differs from fundamentalism, which adopts a more passive approach. Religious radical groups do not shy away from terrorist attacks, armed struggle, or other forms of violence. They often create a clear and distinct image of their alleged enemies, which can be religious minorities, political systems, and even adherents of other religious movements. Radicalism and fundamentalism share common ideological roots, but radicalism has much more ambitious aims and therefore takes a more active, confrontational approach. Members of these groups often feel threatened by what they perceive as social injustice, discrimination, or geopolitical situations, and they encourage radical action to break the status quo.

4.2. Social impacts, security challenges

4.2.1. Social impacts

Globalization, migration, multiculturalism, and the emergence of various forms of religious fundamentalism and radicalism are closely intertwined phenomena, all of which significant

²⁰ BRUCE 2000.

impacts on modern societies. One could even go so far as to say that one is a consequence of the other, and thus they are causally linked and interact closely with one another.

Both religious fundamentalism and radicalism can have significant consequences for society. As a result of **globalization**, countries around the world are becoming increasingly interconnected economically, culturally, technologically, and politically. This creates opportunities for interaction among different religions, ideologies, and cultural identities, but it can also lead to serious tensions.

With the spread of globalization, many traditional societies feel that their identities, cultures, and religions are at risk. This can foster the spread of **religious fundamentalisms**, as globalization is often seen merely as another form of “Western hegemony.” Some communities return to their religious roots as a counterreaction to preserve their identities and traditions. Fundamentalism can lead to polarization and, as cultural conflicts become increasingly intense, can even create sectarian wars, and radicalism can lead to political instability, terrorist attacks, and in extreme cases even civil wars²¹.

Social and political instability often provides fertile soil for both fundamentalism and radicalism, so understanding and precisely defining how to deal with them is a pressing challenge for social scientists and policy makers. If we seek to develop effective strategies with which to counter extremist ideologies, we must be able to discern the differences between religious fundamentalism and religious radicalism.

4.2.2. Security challenges

Both fundamentalism and radicalism pose challenges for security policy. I offer below a discussion of some of these challenges, without claiming to be exhaustive.

4.2.2.1. Cultural and political tensions

Religious fundamentalism can often lead to political tensions, especially in some of the countries of the Middle East, where fundamentalist forces try to influence politics and education, which can lead to internal political and social tensions.

Religious fundamentalism is particularly likely to cause cultural tensions in societies in which different religious groups live alongside one another. In these societies, the strict religious norms demanded by fundamentalists may be difficult to reconcile with the norms of other religions and cultures and may call into question the viability of religious and cultural pluralism. In such circumstances, fundamentalist groups often perceive other religious communities or social strata that do not respect religious differences as enemies.

4.2.2.2. Terrorism

Religious radicalism includes movements or individuals who encourage extreme political or social change based on religious beliefs. Radicalism is not necessarily violent, but it often encourages actions in this direction.

²¹ BOOTH –DUNNE 2008.

Religious radicalism is often linked to terrorism, as radical groups such as the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda launch violent attacks in the name of religion. Their primary aim is to change the political system or impose religious dictates in place of secular political structures. These attacks are particularly threatening because they destabilize societies and pose a direct threat to both state and international security.

4.2.2.3. Migration and the refugee crisis

Migration and the refugee crisis are intertwined with questions of religious radicalism and fundamentalism. Migration has brought westward large numbers of people from other religious and cultural backgrounds, especially from conflict zones in the Islamic world, such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These people are often fleeing religious persecution or civil war, where radicalism is common.

Fears of a rise in radicalism can often gather strength in societies which have welcomed refugees, as some radical groups (e.g. ISIS) have identified refugees as potential targets of manipulation in the service of their aims.

Conflicts ignited by religious radicalism in the Middle East have contributed significantly to the international refugee crisis. Millions of people have been displaced, causing a major migration crisis, particularly in Europe and other regions.

Fundamentalist regimes and groups usually persecute people who do not share their views. In many cases, this has triggered waves of refugees. For example, under the terror of the Islamic State (ISIS), many non-Muslims or Muslims whose attachment to their faith is regarded as insufficient by the regime have been forced to flee their homes²².

4.2.2.4. The destabilization of the social order

Religious fundamentalist and radical movements often constitute a threat to national and regional stability, especially when a given group gains significant support in a given country. Armed uprisings and revolutions can then break out, destabilizing the country or region.

The fight against religious fundamentalism and radicalism presents many challenges, as both phenomena are deeply rooted in individual and community identities and are often linked to perceptions of social injustice, political oppression, and economic disadvantages.

Changes in global politics and the social environment have made religious fundamentalism and religious radicalism an increasingly important issue that can only be kept under control through internationally coordinated strategies.

SUMMARY

In recent decades, the discipline of the sociology of religion has undergone significant changes due to global social and cultural shifts. One of the most obvious consequences of secularization has been the decline in the role of religious institutions. It was therefore particularly important to take a closer look at the changes at work in the depths of postmodern society and the ways

²² BOOTH – DUNNE 2008. 68–70

in which these various changes have been intertwined, with particular reference to religious pluralism, secularization, multiculturalism, and, finally, religious fundamentalism. The study of these trends and shifts reveals numerous challenges and causes for concerns, but there are also encouraging signs.

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