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“Repairing” Classical Theories of Secularization: Two Approaches

Traditional theories of secularization which assume that the rise of modern industrial state brings about a decline of religion have come-under fire from all directions in recent years. The reason is simple: religion just has not been dying-off in the way that traditional theories predict. Still, Casanova and Norris&Inglehart argue that we should not entirely abandon previous theories of secularization. Instead, both works provide critical reviews of traditional theories of secularization and attempt to “update”/“repair” these theories in light of the empirical and historical record.

Norris&Inglehart endeavor to replace a “simple-minded theory of inevitable religious decline” with a theory that explains variation in patterns of secularization. While arguing that the classic version of the secularization theory is “correct in some major respects”, namely in its emphasis on the demand-side explanation of religious decline, the authors “revise” the theory through a “new” emphasis on the concept of “existential security.” Human security, that is freedom from “various risks and dangers”, broadly determines the religiosity of a given individual and/or society in the sense that those without such security will seek solace in religion. Rich, developed nations and poor, undeveloped ones have vastly different vulnerability to risks, contend Norris&Inglehart. For citizens in poor countries life is a constant battle against a host of ugly threats that include premature death, disease, corruption, sudden natural disasters, inequality, environmental segregation and political instability. For Norris&Inglehart the nature of the risk seems irrelevant. The bottom line is that if people are poor, they will be more susceptible to all kinds of threats and ill-equipped to cope with them.

Inhabitants of rich nations, on the other hand, have a substantially diminished vulnerability to the woes of the world because development brings with it nutrition, sanitation and better health care while social welfare and effective states provide a safety-net protecting even the most unfortunate citizens from complete destitution. Norris&Inglehart however are quick to remark that there is an “important distinction to be drawn between” their account and “simpler and more mechanical theories of modernization”: specifically, their approach is probabilistic not deterministic because even “the most affluent postindustrial nations may experience a sudden widespread resurgence of insecurity”(16). Furthermore, what matters is not just simply “levels of national economic resources but their distribution as well”(106). This is how the theory is saved in light of the fact that the US is both incredibly affluent and highly religious. Despite being rich, the American cultural “emphasis on the values of personal responsibility, individual achievement and mistrust of big government, limit the role of public services and the welfare state” meaning that Americans “face greater anxieties than citizens in

other advanced industrialized countries” and that the United States has “greater income inequality than any other advanced industrial democracy”(108). Other outliers, namely Italy, Ireland and Poland and to a lesser extent Canada, are not addressed and certainly cannot be explained in the same manner as the US. The concept of existential security thus seems too broad to be a variable with any explanatory power. Moreover, the second strand of the theory, that cultural change is path dependent and that religious traditions leave a “lasting imprint”, is even more vague. The bottom line for Norris&Inglehart is therefore the sweeping conclusion that modernization (or lack thereof) explains those aspects of religiosity that change whereas “cultural legacy” explains the perseverance of more traditional beliefs and behaviors.

Unlike Norris&Inglehart's attempt at an all encompassing theory through a large-N approach, Casanova warns that his work “is not a comprehensive or systematic” study of the theory of secularization (212). Instead, he dissects the classical secularization theory into a core theory and two related sub-theses. According to Casanova, the core of traditional secularization theories is the “conceptualization of the process of societal modernization as a process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere”(19). The first sub-thesis is the related, but conceptually distinct, idea that modernization will bring about a decline in religious beliefs and practices. The second sub-thesis is that secularization will cause the privatization and marginalization of religion in the modern world.

Through a series of detailed and convincing case studies Casanova affirms that the core of the traditional theory of secularization is essentially valid: “The differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms remains a general modern structural trend,” he writes (212). Yet he concludes that the first sub-thesis, declining religious beliefs and practices, “is manifestly *not* a modern structural trend” but a historical one. Casanova argues that, in fact, the thesis of religious decline is not really a theory at all: it was a political program used by social movements/political parties that just happened to be most successful in places where churches “had attained Caesaropapist establishment and were resisting the process of differentiation”(214).

Exploration of the second sub-thesis, the privatization of religion, is Casanova's chief objective. Again, Casanova contends that privatization is not a structural trend but a “historical option.” He goes on to adopt a Habermasian discursive model that assumes a division of the polity into three spheres: the state, political society and civil society. He then claims that if we understand the recent “deprivatization” of religion as the intervention of religion into the “undifferentiated” arena of civil society then we can achieve “a conception of modern public religion which is compatible with liberal

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freedoms and with modern structural and cultural differentiation”(217). In short, there is no need to see the revival of religiosity and public religions as the revenge of the disenfranchised or the weapons of the weak and poor. Religions “go public” in a way that essentially confirms their ability to adapt to the secularization and differentiation of modern life. Whether religions have the ability and/or chose to go public is contingent on a number of factors including religious principles, historical circumstances and cultural traditions.

Certainly Casanova's work is not without its own frustrating ambiguities. His definition of “deprivatization” is somewhat hazy, seeming to encompass both when religions move between the three public spheres and when they refuse to be relegated to the private sphere of the “home” in the feminist sense of the term. Also, one could criticize his reliance on tradition, principles and culture to explain deprivatization. Is he, like Norris&Inglehart not merely repeating the well-worn platitudes that “culture matters” and “different cultures are different”? The difference, in my opinion, is that Casanova convincingly tells a story of when culture will matter, based on a detailed investigation of historical contingencies, institutional structures and elite decisions. The incredibly blunt nature of the Norris&Inglehart's study tells us little more than that culture matters when modernization theory fails.