The Consequences of Secularization in the West

Peter Jonkers (Tilburg University)

1. Some recent empirical data about secularization

As is commonly known, the term secularization is problematic, and this applies even more to its accurateness to predict future developments of the religious landscape. If secularization is defined as historical processes, which in modern societies were supposed to lead irremediably to a drastic decline of religious beliefs and practices, it is clear that this definition rests on the assumption that modernization was to lead necessarily to secularization, leaving behind religion and other "traditional" customs behind.[1] José Casanova has criticized this assumption, arguing that different processes of modernization are connected with very diverse religious-secular dynamics throughout the world. Yet with respect to European societies, he thinks that the most likely evolution is a transformation from homogeneous confessional church religiosity to homogeneous secularity, without any significant growth of religious pluralism.[2]

As regards church-religiosity, a comparison of the empirical data of 2002 with those of 2016 shows that secularization in (Western) Europe is still ongoing.[3] First, the number of people who consider themselves member of a religious community has dropped significantly, so that nowadays less than 50% of the population in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Belgium are a church-member; a similar drop can be observed in most other European countries, although the percentage of Church-membership in these countries is traditionally considerably higher (with the exception of the Czech Republic).[4] Second, this trend is even more striking when it comes to the regular attendance of religious services among Church-members; with the exception of Poland, Slovakia, Croatia and Austria, this percentage is below 25% in all European countries, and is declining everywhere in comparison with 2002.[5] Third, when it comes to the doctrinal content of (Christian) religion, like belief in heaven and hell, miracles, life after death, we see not only a certain decrease in most West-European countries, but also a growing individualization and eclecticism of the ways in which religion is experienced in Europe: more and more people select from the 'package' that is offered by the dominant

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[1] José Casanova, "A Catholic Church in a Global Secular World," in *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision,* eds. Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean, João J. Vila-Chã (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), 69.

[2] Casanova, "A Catholic Church," 70.

[3] Pepijn van Houwelingen, "Nederland in Europees perspectief," in Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid* (Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018), 17-34; Claude Dargant, "Religious Change, Public Space and Beliefs in Europe," in *European Values. Trends and Divides over Thirty Years,* eds. Pierre Bréchon and Frédéric Gonthier (Leiden, Brill, 2017), 104-122.

[4] Van Houwelingen, "Nederland in Europees perspectief," 22.

[5] Ibid., 24f.

religious denominations those aspects that suit them best. Especially in secular countries, the churches have lost a great deal of their relevance for people's personal (spiritual) life.[6]

It is important to note that these three batches of data concern almost exclusively organized religion, and do not cover the wide field of 'free religiosity' or 'spirituality'. When we focus on these aspects of religion, we see first of all that people throughout Europe are quite positive about the socio-cultural meaning of religion, like providing inner peace, consolation, social network, although the percentages are lower in the more secularized countries.[7] Furthermore, the percentage of people who believe in God or a higher power, as well of people who pray at least once a month is much higher than those of church-membership. Yet, the degree of this kind of religiosity has been declining in almost all European countries from 2002 till 2016.[8]

The above empirical overview confirms the observations of Casanova, namely that the secularization process is still continuing in all European countries, affecting organized religion as well as unorganized religiosity. Especially in secular countries this inevitably means that the number of 'nones' is increasing too. As far as the Dutch population in the age-group between 17 and 30 is concerned, the increase of 'nones' is striking: from 33% in 1983 to 56% in 2016.[9] This highlights a trend, which Danièle Hervieu-Léger has called the exculturation of (church) religiosity.[10] Moreover, as far as I can see, there is no big difference in the general trend of secularization between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. Obviously, there are major differences between countries (e.g. Poland versus Czech Republic; Austria versus the Netherlands), but they can easily be explained by longstanding socio-historical factors and hardly by the presumed difference between hard secularization in Central/Eastern Europe and soft secularization in Western Europe.

2. Dissolving religion(s) in a post-Durkheimian era

Let us try to give a theoretical explanation of these empirical data to get a better understanding of the current situation of Church and religion in Western Europe.[11] Charles Taylor defines the mode under which religion appears in our times as post-Durkheimian: "The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must

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[6] Ibid., 27.

[7] Ibid., 29.

[8] Ibid., 33

[9] Joep de Hart, "Ontwikkelingen in de kerkelijkheid en private godsdienstige activiteiten," in Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid* (Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018), 37.

[10] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Mapping the Contemporary Forms of Catholic Religiosity," *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age,* eds. Charles Taylor, José Casanova and George McLean (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 34.

[11] See also: Peter Jonkers, "Serving the Church through Wisdom: Revitalizing Wisdom Traditions in Christian Faith," in *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church,* eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), 75-79.

make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this."[12] This explains why there are nowadays so many people who see themselves as seekers for a meaning in life that resonates deeply inside them, as pilgrims on a quest for personal spiritual enrichment in a world marked by an 'immanent frame'.[13] What they are looking for is a more direct experience of the sacred, a greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth, a sense of unity and wholeness of the self, and a reclaiming of the body and its pleasures, all of which they find lacking in the institutional churches with their focus on doctrine and authority. This striving reflects a new understanding of the good and a fuller human flourishing, and uses religious language and images to convey it. In spite of the often rather flattened character of spirituality in the post-Durkheimian era, Taylor thinks that the spiritual ideal of 'wholeness' and the traditional Christian one of 'holiness' are not necessarily opposed to each other, which explains his optimism that people's belief in horizontal transcendence can rather easily transform into a vertical one.[14]

One of the great merits of Taylor's analysis is his description the ongoing changes in the religious landscape in terms of transformation rather than secularization, i.e. the irreversible decline of religious ideas and practices, consequential to modernization. Yet I think that his optimistic ideas about the specific nature of this transformation, namely from horizontal into vertical transcendence, are too much inspired by the American situation. In my view, Casanova's more pessimistic assessment of what is going on in the religious landscape of Western Europe is more accurate. To substantiate my position, I will analyze the phenomenon of 'dissolving religion(s)'.[15]

Dissolving religions refers to the phenomenon that religious denominations become less identifiable, so that the traditional clear division of the religious field is receding. The reason for this is that church-membership counts less and less as an identity-marker and is replaced by a wide range of other characteristics, such as social class, education, ethnicity, language etc. Moreover, a power reversal has taken place between the institutional churches and the individual faithful: individuals nowadays decide autonomously whether they want to be a church member, and they experience church membership and being religious as only one out of many options. Additionally, the religious option is becoming a marginal one, and has to be justified vis-à-vis the predominant secular option.[16] This shows that the churches are no longer

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[12] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 486f.

[13] See Charles Taylor, "The Church Speaks – to Whom?," *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age,* eds. Charles Taylor, José Casanova and George McLean (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 17-24.

[14] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 510.

[15] See Jonkers, "Serving the Church," 81-84.

[16] See Hans Joas, "The Church in a World of Options," *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision,* eds. Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean and João J. Vila-Chã (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), 89-91.

in a monopoly or oligopoly position, but have become competitors on a turbulent religious market with a very diverse supply.[17]

The phenomenon of dissolving religions not only concerns the diminishing role of the churches in society, but also the profound changes in the religious convictions of the faithful. They become manifest in the changing proportion between religious dwellers and seekers, especially among the church members.[18] As a preliminary remark, one has to realize that the empirically demonstrable group of people who are actively seeking spiritual growth in various (religious) traditions without belonging to any of the traditional churches, is a (small) minority.[19] Actually, the non-active seekers and the religious indifferent form the overall majority of the population in secularized Western Europe.[20] Yet, there are plenty of reasons to argue that the term 'seekers' applies generically to the overall attitude of today's people. Most of them draw substantially, but selectively from the Christian heritage, and sparsely from other religious traditions, but emphasize above all the personal character of their religion. Many of them even think that belonging to a church is not necessary in order to be religious, since they are not in search of a doctrine, but rather are looking for deep experiences on the path of their personal spiritual journey.[21] For obvious reasons, this attitude applies most strongly to non-church-affiliated seekers, but many church members take this stance too.[22] Their beliefs, practices, moral attitudes, etc. reflect less and less the doctrines of the denominations to which they belong, so that these doctrines have lost their role as religious identity markers.

A second feature of religiosity in the post-Durkheimian era is *dissolving religion,* meaning that the religious field as a whole is dissolving into a wider sphere of well-being, happiness, and consumption.[23] Although the demarcations between the religious and the non-religious domain have never been sharp, the borders between them have become much vaguer still since the turn of the century: when people define themselves as 'a religious or a spiritual person,' they are referring to an ever widening sphere of interest, of which Christian faith is only a part. This sphere ranges from traditional Christian spirituality over the spirituality of non-Christian

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[17] Staf Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers,* eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 131-3; David Voas and Stefanie Doebler, "Secularization in Europe: An Analysis of Inter-Generational Religious Change," in *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe. Painting European Moral Landscapes,* eds. Wil Arts and Loek Halman (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), 248; Joep De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2014), 31f.

[18] See Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers, "Introduction" in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers,* eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 4-7, as well as the individual chapters of that volume.

[19] Loek Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers* eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 38, 58.

[20] Ibid., 51.

[21] Ibid., 45; Joep De Hart and Paul Dekker, "Floating Believers: Dutch seekers and the Church," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers,* eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 72f.; De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, 24.

[22] De Hart and Dekker, "Floating Believers," pp. 82f., 85.

[23] For an explanation of this term see Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church," 134f.

religions (e.g. Zen-meditation) to so-called new spiritualities, such as yoga, New Age, certain psycho-therapeutic techniques, visiting wellness centers, music festivals etc.[24] In addition to this, there is a host of specialized magazines, websites, fairs, informal groups etc., through which people can get information and connect with like-minded. This illustrates that vertical and horizontal transcendence are merging or, to phrase it more concretely, that the difference between the religious domain in the strict sense and all kinds of 'human interest' matters is fading. This evolution demonstrates that Grace Davie's famous characterization of today's religiosity as "believing without belonging" is becoming less salient. The term 'believing' refers at least implicitly to the vertical transcendence of an established religion. Yet the phenomenon of dissolving religion shows that 'believing' is being replaced by a more indefinite 'longing', so that "longing without belonging" is a more accurate description of the current situation.

The multifaceted phenomenon of dissolving religion(s) shows that the prospects of religious faith in the strong sense and those of the churches look rather weak, especially in Western Europe. When we tie in again with Taylor's analysis of the post-Durkheimian era, what essentially distinguishes the strong manifestations of religious faith from weaker expressions of general spirituality is the effective presence of a normative, vertically transcendent frame of reference. Typically, this frame is offered by the traditional churches, which support people in transforming their lives in a way that goes beyond ordinary human flourishing. However, the ongoing dissolution of religion(s) in Western Europe offers a strong indication that people's willingness to perform this transformation by making the transition from horizontal to vertical transcendence as well as the capacity of the traditional churches to support the faithful in this process seem less and less realistic.

3. Transformation rather than secularization

Although the secularization-process is still continuing in Western Europe, this does not mean that religion, even in its institutional shape, would eventually disappear from the European socio-cultural landscape. Instead, it makes much more sense to speak of a (radical) transformation than of the disappearance of religion as the inevitable outcome of secularization.[25]

An important aspect of this transformation is that religions still play an implicit, yet crucial role in people's socio-cultural identity, especially insofar as religions are closely linked with systems of values, norms and behaviors outside the religious field.[26] According to Durkheim, normative uncertainty is latently present in all modern societies, since individual and societal moral norms

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[24] Ton Bernts and Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016), 149.
[25] Joep de Hart, "Slotbeschouwing," in Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018),147; Dargent, "Religious Change," 104.
[26] Dargent, "Religious Change," 104.

are not derived anymore from an eternal divine order or an immutable natural law, but depend on the contingencies of societal recognition. Therefore, it is no surprise that the great variety of norms and values and the speed, with which they are changing cause a dominant feeling of normative uncertainty among secular people as well as church members.[27] Another important element that explains the current normative uncertainty has to do with the fact that some of the predictions of the modernization theory on moral issues have not come true. This theory predicted the emergence and diffusion of an ethos of individualism and instrumentalism in all modern societies, as well as a procedural and universalist ethics, combined with the fading away of all kinds of social discrimination. The expected result was a society, in which cultural and religious differences would be irrelevant, so that conflicts over substantial values would belong to a distant past.

However, in contrast to this prediction we see that cultural and religious traditions continue to leave a lasting imprint on the worldviews and values in all European societies. These traditions are especially important in those domains where modernization has eroded the functional basis of traditional moral rules, without being able to provide plausible new ones, as the example of the care for the sick and elderly shows. Another persisting problem of modern societies is that moral rules, which seem at first sight universal and rational, lose their self-evidence when people try to apply these rules when being confronted with concrete moral dilemmas.[28] What has made this problem even worse is the fact that these universal principles tend to become ever more formal (or abstract) and procedural, while the moral decisions that people have to take in concrete situations become more and more entangled. In sum, there is a gap between the universal, but formal moral principles of modernity and the culture-specific values that people used to take as guidance in their concrete moral behaviour, while it becomes clear at the same time that the former have not been able to replace the latter.

Confronted with this problem, it is no wonder that we witness a growing popularity of so-called virtue-ethics. This kind of ethics rests on substantial – rather than procedural – values, which are theoretically underpinned and existentially nourished by a (religious or secular) tradition, consisting of (old and contemporary) stories, doctrines, rituals, and experiences that exemplify the good life. Typically, people form communities around these value-traditions and let their lives be inspired and orientated by them. Another important element of these value-traditions is that they have a longstanding experience in practical wisdom, which is precisely aimed at bridging the gap, characteristic of moral life as such, between abstract universality and concrete particularity. Because this gap has become acute in all contemporary Western societies, it comes as no surprise that the need for this kind of wisdom is increasing.

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[27] De Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, 42.
[28] Hermann Dülmer, "Modernization, Culture and Morality in Europe: Universalism, Contextualism or Relativism?," *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe,* eds. Wil Arts and Loek Halman (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), 257.

As is commonly known, wisdom has always been part and parcel of all religious traditions. In my view, this aspect of religious traditions connects better with the above analyzed predicament of contemporary societies than betting on the Church's guiding role in transforming people's spirituality from horizontal into vertical transcendence, which largely depends on the questionable assumption of the continuing impact of the spiritual revolution on secular societies. Because all people, regardless whether they are religious or not, experience normative uncertainty as well as the gap between universal moral principles and concrete practices, the need for a truthful or at least plausible orientation in all kinds of moral and existential issues is a fundamental one. Hence, religious traditions can render an invaluable service to the world of today, in particular by offering this wisdom as a truthful life orientation and by educating pastors whose counsels are inspired by this tradition, thus enabling people to find a plausible answer to moral dilemmas.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can safely be stated that the consequences of secularization are quite ambiguous, and in this Western and Central/Eastern Europe follow a similar pattern. First, soft secularization is a continuing process across all European countries. Second, this leads to the dissolution of denominational differences and of the differences between religion in the strict sense and other fields of human interest. Third, this dissolution does not result in the complete disappearance of religion, but, paradoxically, rather in its transformation, consisting in the often implicit reemergence of substantial values. Transformed religions appear to keep their relevance in this respect, if they are willing to present themselves as traditions of true wisdom and if their pastors can serve as mediators between abstract moral principles and concrete behaviors.

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