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Religion and Modernity. An International Comparison

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The very first impression of this book, conveyed by its title and size, is confirmed already after reading its first chapter (“Theoretical Reflections”): this is a highly ambitious work. Indeed, two simple words – religion and modernity – have comprised the core of sociology of religion since its beginning, though most pronouncedly since the 1960s. While some might claim that we already know everything about how modernity influences religion, this book shows that it is still possible to offer nuanced theoretical reflections about several empirical cases from around the globe. Of course, the main subject of the book is secularization theory or, in the authors’ words, its critical examination. Upon reading the book carefully, it becomes evident that it can be perceived as yet another defence of secularization theory, though from a critical perspective focusing on the elements of modernization processes that are (in)compatible with religion.

The question of whether secularization constitutes a general framework for understanding religion in modernity can be addressed by conducting a detailed empirical analysis. On the basis of primarily quantitative data, the authors detect trends in modernity–religion patterns in three geographical areas: Western Europe, Eastern Europe and “outside” Europe. The first section covers West Germany, Italy and the Netherlands; the second Russia, East Germany and Poland; and the third the USA, South Korea and Charismatic, Pentecostal and Evangelical movements in Europe, the USA and Brazil. If one is interested in a very detailed analysis of a particular country, region or religious movement, this is the right book for them to consult.

The part that will probably interest RASCEE readers the most is the one on Eastern Europe, guided by the general question of whether it concerns a religious renaissance. Three countries represent three distinct cases. Russia is a country in which religion gained remarkable influence after the fall of communism. The authors list several social factors and underline the point that Russia’s religious revival is not so connected with church activities, such as religious socialization or missionary work. Social factors include a severe economic and social crisis in times of which people search for moral authority. Although there is support for separation of church and politics, high expectations of the church’s social role are noticeable. This is reflected in the very close proximity of church and state and, in general, the nationalistic nature of Orthodoxy. The picture is quite ambivalent, but there is the argument that the principle of functional differentiation is less accepted in Russia than in other parts of

Europe. Thus, the authors question Russia's religious revival in the post-communist era by describing it as having a primarily national and political character which did not transform itself into "genuine" religious vitality. East Germany is quite a different story. The fall of religiosity during the communist era did not transform itself into religious awakening in the post-communist period, as many had expected. Here, the social role of the Protestant Church had weakened even before communist times. Modernization, although also occurring in other Eastern European countries, was able to diminish the role of religion in East Germany as, due to Germany's complex history, the attachment of Germans to their own nation was not a factor of mobilization. This undermined the role of the church in upholding the national spirit. The authors also pinpoint the way in which the church acted in relation to the political regime and find that its openness to society in those harsh political circumstances contributed to the weakening of its social position. The particular circumstances of German reunification, as a result of which the church came to be seen as a victorious Western institution, were likewise not helpful in boosting religiosity in the 1990s. Yet another story comes from Poland which raises the question of how the Catholic Church has maintained its capacity to remain an integrative factor with an amazing integrative capacity, at least from the comparative perspective, and this despite all the public controversies about the role of the Catholic Church in the post-communist era. As in the other chapters, the authors list a range of explorative factors. Besides the strong religion-nation link, a detailed analysis of church-state relations reveals how the church acted throughout the various phases of the communist regime, and the effects this had. The role of John Paul II and the fact that Poland has remained a country with a large agricultural sector are also singled out. Interestingly, criticism of how the Catholic Church became a political actor in the post-communist era and acceptance of the separation of religion and politics by the majority of Poland's population led to the diminishing of the church's political role, whereas, surprisingly, its social role increased. The maintenance of religious culture and religious family socialization, the fact that the individualization process is still not reflected in the weakening of church-type religiosity and the significant role of the "us-them" discourse upholding the role of Catholicism in diverting threats to Polish identity (now not in terms of ethnicity, but of values) are just some of the many different factors.

Are we then offered quite a detailed analysis, which, most probably, explains individual cases but does not explain the general patterns? How can a compromise be reached between an analysis of this kind and major historical processes, and where do "exceptional" cases fit in (e.g. Russia and Poland)? The authors try to solve this by stating that their analysis has proven the already known fact that functional differentiation is the main process that diminishes the role of religion in modernity. They also show how, contrary to what many claim, the individualization process does not pose any substantial challenge to the secularizing effects of modernity. However, functional differentiation is not a straightforward process. The main issue here is whether religion is capable of allying with non-religious identities and interests. If it is, then functional differentiation is either not fully accepted, or does not bring about the expected consequences. That is the reason why, in the authors' view, there are several accompanying hypotheses that could greatly help us understand certain cases. These are (1) differentiation–dedifferentiation dynamics, and the absorption and distraction hypotheses; (2) the coupling thesis, the overpowering thesis and the thesis of the simultaneous presence of the religious at different levels of society; and (3) the theorem of majority confirmation, the theorem of internal diversification and the conflict hypothesis.

In addition to providing a detailed analysis of several cases around the globe, these hypotheses and the way they were employed will probably be the most discussed issues this book raises. At the very least, they deserve to be tested further. Of course, there are some other aspects that will also be thoroughly discussed. From the perspective of the Eastern European cases, the question which poses itself is why the capabilities of religion to represent a range of non-religious identities and interests are treated as, in fact, non-religious, not "genuinely

religious” or as not a religious function. This relates to the book’s definition of religion which, although set out very broadly, seems to disregard religion’s extraordinary capability to not confine itself to a “narrow meanings provider” role. If religion–non-religion links have both throughout history and at present been very differently anchored across different regions and confessional traditions, there is a potential tension between arguing for the need for a multi-paradigmatic theory and lamentation over criticism of secularization theory. Choosing yet more cases from around the globe would most likely provide further insights into what is paradigmatic and what should be treated as exceptional. Finally, this book rightly confirms the possibility of the role of religious actors having far-reaching effects. If that is so, then any data which is not rigorously quantitative is nevertheless quite illuminating and should not be dismissed as insufficiently reliable, particularistic, subjective or non-transparent.
