

David Martin

The Future of Christianity. Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization

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REVIEWED BY **Siniša Zrinščak, University of Zagreb, Croatia**

Faced with the title *The Future of Christianity*, one might question even the bravery of anyone who would be able to write on this topic. This is the only reason why there is a need to underline the name and work of David Martin, though he is not only a well-known but also well respected as a sociologist of religion around the globe.

There are two main aspects of his work that were already visible in his seminal work, *A General Theory of Secularization*, published back in 1978. First is the idea that secularization is deeply tied to a particular place and that this is why there are so many distinctive patterns of secularization / religious–secular processes. To say that means to be only at the starting point, as sociology has to understand how culture, geography and ideas in general interact. The second aspect is that understanding the place and meanings of secularization requires an extraordinary knowledge of history and, because the book deals with religion, theology, knowledge of which Martin respectfully displays. Given these two preconditions, having a preoccupation with the future is natural; it is merely an extension of an extraordinary discussion about a presence.

Martin is very clear about secularization: it is not a myth. It is something that is, though very different, happening around us. However, secularization should not be treated (as it very often is) as a master narrative. A master narrative is a simple truth, an exclusive notion concerning the ultimate goal of humankind (liberty, equality, liberation, universalism, etc.) and an overall idea that is in conflict with alternative master narratives. In each part of Martin's book, his need to deconstruct narratives is evident. Sociology has to be cautious about simple truths that are floating throughout history. It should dig deep, past vague descriptions of secularization.

Similarly, Martin is explicit about his rejection of the notion of "post-secularity". Post-secularity refers to a shift in society from secularization to what is termed a "return of God", "revitalization" or "new public presence of religion". As he demonstrates, not only has religion never disappeared from the social ground, but even secularizing processes cannot be understood without reflecting upon their interaction with both religion itself and religious images constructed and presented by certain groups. A closer look is welcome: there are huge variations even across the religious landscape of the "Global North". There are visible differences between, for example, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, between the USA and Europe—indeed within the USA itself—between the USA and Canada, within Canada itself (the Quebec case) and between the Protestant North Europe and the Catholic/Orthodox South. The picture becomes more complicated when Martin turns his gaze to what he calls the "two-thirds world".

To sum up, "As for de-secularization in general I have indicated that the most obvious cases relate to the world-wide collapse of the Marxist functional alternative to religion: a constituency of more than one and a half billion of people. Elsewhere we have continuing secularization in the special situation of North-Western Europe, a fairly steady religious state in the special

situation of the USA, and in Latin America and Africa the persistence of largely inspired universes **for which secularization and de-secularization are alike largely irrelevant**" (p. 104, reviewer's emphasis).

Democracy, politics and violence are principal subjects in a few chapters in this book. These are chapters in which the concept of power is extensively explored. In line with Martin's aim of deconstruction, which is demonstrated throughout the work, he warns us that the transition from religion to secularism may merely be a replacement of one power with another, whether pacifistic or, indeed, violent. The secular model can still be religious in terms of its basic features, though differently presented. In a word, a very secular mode of human existence (kinship, nation, etc.) may still be a very violent one, a fact that should not be forgotten when studying modern processes and religious involvement therein.

Readers of this particular journal might find Part 2 of the book interesting. It is entitled "Case Studies of Secularization" and is divided further in two chapters: "An Eastern European Pattern of Secularization?" and "East Germany: The World's Most Secular Society". Three crucial concepts that guide Martin's analysis in Part 2 can be singled out. The first is the decisive impact of a particular religion–nation nexus: the relationship between religion and national identity (whether positive or inimical) largely explains differences throughout the religious landscape of Eastern Europe. The second concept is that of state-sponsored secularization, which is different from (and has different consequences than) secularization based on modernization. The third concept is that of alternative modernities, which explains the long-term differences concerning how different confessional traditions (Protestantism, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy) shape and understand patterns of modern development. Regarding this, Martin's detailed descriptions of Romania and Bulgaria, as well as those (though not from Eastern Europe but for the sake of a profound comparison) of Greece and Ireland are instructive. Concerning East Germany, Martin points to a distinctive form of secularization that is explained by Protestant-like individualization (the "association of Protestantism with authority, power and submission to the state", p. 152), its longer history of secularization (before the Communists took power) and its Communist-led, rapid, state-sponsored secularization that was also partly connected with a specific Communist ideological misuse of people's experience with Nazism.

It is worth pointing out possible objections to this section of the book. The concepts that Martin uses to analyze the profound differences found in Eastern Europe (from exceptionally high levels of religiosity in Romania and Poland to exceptionally low levels in former East Germany and the Czech Republic) have already been widely used in a number of papers and by various authors. In that respect, it could be said that the book does not offer much novelty. Still, I would not draw this conclusion too quickly, as Martin does offer a systematic explanation in which "extraordinariness" is seen as an expected part of his approach, a part that is very sensitive to particularism. Recall that particularism is a necessary way of explaining the role of religion in today's society. An informed reader might also not be convinced by Martin's analysis which is not always accurate regarding details. Still, what is valuable here is a general picture.

This book, about the future of Christianity, perhaps is not a typical sociological book. It is not easily readable either, at least not for those not entirely familiar with history and theology. It repeats, in large part, the main ideas explained in the author's previous work, particularly *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, published in 2005. Still, *The Future of Christianity* is, really truthfully, such an inspiring book. It goes against any simple (model) explanation of social processes. It gives answers but simultaneously produces new questions. In this way, Martin risks being less influential than other sociologists. However, this speaks more about our inability to grasp the complexity of the social life.