

It is unimaginable to tell the story of the development of the sociology of religion in the 20th century without considering the critical role played by Karel Dobbelaere, formerly professor of the Catholic University of Leuven and, after his retirement, professor emeritus of the Catholic University of Leuven, and the University of Antwerp. He was also a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and Arts and a member of the Academia Europea. His profound influence on the development of the discipline was due to his theory of secularisation and his role in the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR). Together with Peter Berger, David Martin, and Bryan Wilson, Karel Dobbelaere was one of the most prominent sociologists who tried to understand the causes and effects of the secularisation process. His contribution was to enable an understanding of secularisation as a multi-dimensional process at three levels: individual, group and societal (Dobbelaere 1981, 2002). However, though it may be overlooked in mainstream scholarship, secularisation means that religion ceases to be significant for the social system, but “this says nothing about the religious consciousness of individuals although it may affect it” (Dobbelaere 2002:189). To summarise, secularisation has not been a straightforward process, and relations between levels vary in different social contexts. In addition to theoretical work about secularisation, he carried out a great deal of research, including the study on Soka Gakkai, which played a pivotal role in the sociology of religion (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994).

His role in the International Society for the Sociology of Religion included many important positions, as he was President (1984-1992), General Secretary (2002-2010), and President of the Local Committees for two ISSR conferences, the one in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in 1985 (together with his wife Liliane Voyé), and the other one in Leuven in 1999. In recognition of his influence, the ISSR appointed him as Honorary President and established the Karel Dobbelaere lecture, to be delivered at every second ISSR conference. He was honoured to deliver the first such lecture (Dobbelaere 2014). For anyone interested in the history of the discipline, and issues concerning how to understand the role of religion, how to research it, and how to position the sociology of religion in relation to other sociological disciplines, issues which are still current, albeit in different ways, I recommend that particular article (Dobbelaere 2014), as well as his historical account of the ISSR available at the ISSR web-page (<https://www.sisr-issr.org/en/pages>). The book devoted to him is also highly recommended to anyone interested in the sociology of religion (Laermans, Wilson and Billiet 1998).

On a personal note, the work of Karel Dobbelaere formed a vital part of the lectures given by Professor Srđan Vrcan during my master's degree in sociology of religion in the mid-1980s at the University of Zagreb. In 2005, when the ISSR conference took place in Zagreb, we cooperated closely as he was the ISSR General Secretary, and I was President of the Local Committee. I will not forget his dedication to the conference's success but also his unconditional support and friendship.

Thank you, Karel!

References

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