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Conditions of Belief and Unbelief in Our Global Secular Age

(Lecture presented as part of the Templeton Project, Dominican Monastery, Prague, March 9, 2020)

The formation of a global world system of religions (in the plural) is as intrinsic to processes of globalization as the formation of a single world capitalist system and the formation of a global world system of nation-states.

But these three dynamics of globalization – the economic, the political, and the cultural-religious -, are distinctly different. The world capitalist system is a single global economy with its own internal division of labor between capital and labor, between centers and peripheries, firms, markets, etc. It is a single internally constituted and differentiated system

The world system of nation-states, by contrast, is a system of plural, yet isomorphic units. It is constituted by the formation of a plurality of nation-states, all assuming a similar form. The system became globalized through the expansion of the European Westphalian system of territorial nation-states to the entire globe through Western colonialism and anti-Western anti-colonial independence movements.

The global world system of religions is not only plural, but pluralist. Each religion is and claims to be unique and different, yet equal to the others. It is therefore, a system based on the principle of equal pluralist diversity. The global system of world religions has been formed through a dual process of differentiation:

- a) through the modern differentiation of religion, from non-religion, that is from the secular, and
- b) through the differentiation of each and all religions from each other.

Thus, when analyzing global religious dynamics, one needs to pay attention to both interrelated differentiations, namely, to the relations between the religious and the secular throughout the world, that is, how the boundaries between the religious and the secular are constituted, **and** to the relations of all religions with one another, through a process of mutual recognition.

The Internal Road of European Confessionalization and De-Confessionalization: Secularization Without Religious Pluralism

The secularization of Western European societies, understood here simply as the drastic and progressive decline in religious beliefs and practices among the European population, is a social fact that is not in question. What is questionable is the theoretical explanation of European secularization as the necessary result of processes of modernization. In fact, in the last decades it has become increasingly evident that modernization in many parts of the world has not been accompanied by noticeable religious decline, but rather by different kinds of religious revitalization and most significantly by the proliferation of religious pluralism. Therefore, one needs to put into question the assumption that modernization necessarily leads to secularization.

Thus, we need to examine two different questions. Firstly, if modernization per se cannot serve as a blanket explanation for the unquestionable secularization of European societies, what could serve as a more parsimonious and concrete explanation of European secularization from a global comparative historical perspective. Relatedly, and this would be the second question, given that modernization and secularization in Europe was not accompanied by dynamics of religious pluralization, how can one account for the fact that modernization in

much of the rest of the world is accompanied by religious pluralization with limited secularization?

To answer both questions, I am going to build upon Peter Berger's last formulation of his own revisionist theory of secular modernity. In his book *The Many Altars of Modernity*, Berger proposed to change the focus of analysis from secularization to pluralism.¹ He argued that modernity does not produce necessarily secularization. What it does produce inevitably is pluralism, specifically two diverse kinds of pluralism, namely religious pluralism and secular-religious pluralism. My own succinct response to Berger is that European modernity produced secularization without religious pluralization, while modernity in much of the rest of the world produced religious pluralization without much secularization.

In Berger's own words, "the new paradigm should be able to deal with two pluralisms – the co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses."² We need to account, first of all, for religious pluralism, that is, for the emergence of a global system of religions which I call global denominationalism. But we also need to account, additionally, for secular-religious pluralism, that is, for the emergence of differentiated but co-existing religious and secular spheres, both in social space and in the minds of individuals.

Berger's new paradigm, however, is still embedded within a theory of Western modernization that views modernity itself as the carrier or catalyst of both types of pluralism: multi-religious pluralism and secular-religious pluralism. Countering Berger, I would argue that, European modernity is certainly the carrier or catalyst of the second type of modern pluralism, the secular-religious one, but not of the first one, multi-religious pluralism. As the exceptional process of

¹ Berger 2014.

² *Ibidem*, ix.

European secularization amply demonstrates, European modernity per se does not contribute to religious pluralism. We need an additional factor or analytical framework to understand the emergence of a global system of religious pluralism, and this in my view has to be a theory of globalization, a globalization that both precedes Western secular modernity and continues in an accelerated and transformed manner after Western secular modernity.

Global religious pluralization emerged before Western secular modernity in the early modern era of global interreligious encounters that accompanied the early modern European colonial expansion, before global Western hegemony. Subsequently, religious pluralization has become accelerated in our contemporary global age to such an extent that it is beginning to transform in the process also the heartlands of European secularization.

European modernity leads to secularization but not necessarily to religious pluralization, at least not within the European nation-states. Globalization leads to religious pluralization but not necessarily to secularization. The intertwining of both processes is what produces the combination of the two types of pluralism and the simultaneity of global religious and secular dynamics. In the first part of my lecture I want to examine the ways in which secular and religious dynamics are becoming intertwined everywhere through the globalization of the secular immanent frame and through ongoing process of interreligious mutual recognition, which I call global denominationalism.

The immanent frame, a concept developed by the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, refers to the emergence of the modern institutional structures of democratic states, economic markets, scientific institutions and mass media, all of which are secular and immanent, that is, without any vertical transcendent referent, and thus function *etsi deus non daretur*, as if God would not exist. The expression goes back to Hugo Grotius' attempt to ground a system of international law

without any divine or transcendent referent. In this respect, the early modern Westphalian system of states was a secular one. Each of the states assumed absolute sovereignty vis a vis the other, even if each of them was also simultaneously a confessional state, in the sense that they enforced the religious confessionalization of their subjects.

The first truly modern secular state, however, the United States of America, was born as a secular state without any previous process of confessionalization. It was based, from its inception, on a “wall of separation” between church and state, instituted by the dual clause of the First Amendment, which prohibited any religious establishment at the state level, while protecting the free exercise of each and all religions in civil society. As the history of the United States shows, however, separation of church and state does not mean the separation of religion and politics, and the secularization of the state can go hand in hand with periodical religious revivals of all kinds within society.

It is obvious that capitalist markets also function as if God would not exist, even though some of the global capitalist tycoons, in the United States or in many Muslim countries, may be religious believers. Similarly, American scientific institutions, which as we know have produced a majority of Nobel Prizes in the sciences since World War II, also function *etsi deus non daretur*. Yet, some of the scientists may possibly be believers and certainly large sectors of the American population may believe in “Creationism”, in the same way as other sectors of the American population may believe in “Darwinian evolutionism.” In other words, the global secular immanent frame is compatible with all kinds of religious dynamics at the individual as well as the institutional level.

Similarly, in the rest of the world, the globalization of the immanent frame is not necessarily accompanied by “the exit from religion”, that is by the privatization and decline of religion. It may be accompanied, rather, by all types of religious

transformations, in different directions, as the religious/secular binary system of classification that emerged within Western Christianity enters in dynamic transformative interaction with all non-Western systems of classification. All the religio-cultural systems, Christian and non-Christian, Western and non-Western, have been and continue being transformed through these global interactive dynamics.

Everywhere, the global expansion of the immanent frame leads to the institutionalization of different kinds of secular regimes, which become interconnected with different religious dynamics. It should be obvious, however, that when people around the world use the same category of religion they actually mean very different things. The actual concrete meaning of whatever people denominate as "religion" can only be elucidated in the context of their particular discursive practices. But the very fact that the same category of religion is being used globally across cultures and civilizations testifies to the global expansion of the modern secular-religious system of classification of reality which first emerged in the modern Christian West.

While the religious/secular system of classification of reality may have become globalized, what remains hotly disputed and debated almost everywhere in the world today is how, where, and by whom the proper boundaries between the religious and the secular ought to be drawn. There are in this respect multiple competing secularisms, as there are multiple and diverse forms of religious resistance to those secularisms.

Paradoxically, the global institutionalization of the secular immanent frame becomes the very guarantor of the post-axial secular/religious system, which guarantees the equal, non-hierarchic free exercise of religion to all forms of religion, pre-axial, axial, and post-axial. Indeed, what characterizes the contemporary global moment is the fact that all forms of human religion, past and

present, from the most "primitive" to the most "post-modern" are available for individual and collective appropriation. Equally relevant, moreover, is that fact that increasingly they must learn to coexist side by side in today's global cities. This contemporary social fact tends to put into question all teleological schemes of religious rationalization and development which tended to place "primitive" and "traditional" forms of religion as older human cultural forms to be superseded by more modern, secular, and rational ones.

While nationally, religious dynamics are mainly conditioned by particular forms of secular regimes and by different patterns of state management of religious freedom and religious pluralism, at the global level we are clearly witnessing the emergence of what I call global denominationalism.

It is the proliferation of de-territorialized transnational global imagined communities, or global *ummas*, that I call the emerging global denominationalism. This global denominationalism today encompasses the so-called old world religions (all the ism's: Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc., all names which only became widely used in the 19th century, when what we today call Islam was usually denominated Muhammedism), as well as many new forms of hybrid globalized religions, such as the Bahais, Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Afro-American religions, Falun Gong, etc.,. These global religious denominations today compete with many other forms of secular imagined communities as well as with modern nationalism. The emerging global denominationalism, in this respect, includes religious as well as secular denominations.

By denominationalism, I mean a system of mutual recognition of groups within society. It is the name we give to ourselves and the name by which others recognize us. Indeed, distinctive of the American system of religious

denominationalism is the fact that it is not state regulated, that it is voluntary, and that it is a system of mutual recognition of group identities.

The process of constitution of a global system of “religions” can best be understood as a process of global religious denominationalism, at the level of global civil society, whereby all the so-called “world religions” are redefined and transformed, in contraposition to “the secular”, through interrelated reciprocal processes of particularistic differentiation, universalistic claims, and mutual recognition. As Roland Robertson has emphasized, universal particularism and particular universalism are intrinsically interrelated and inherent to processes of globalization. Each “world religion” claims its universal right to be unique and different, thus its particularism, while at the same time presenting itself globally as a universal path for all of humanity. Like internal denominationalism in the United States, global denominationalism is emerging as a self-regulated system of religious pluralism and mutual recognition of religious groups in global civil society. Global denominationalism emerges through a process of mutual recognition of the particular and universal claims.

Looking at interreligious and religious-secular conflicts around the world, it is evident that the ongoing process of mutual recognition of all religions and of mutual recognition of the religious and the secular is not smooth and may be accompanied by violent conflicts between religious groups as well as between religious and secular world-views. It is all part of the global struggle for universal-particular, human mutual recognition.

It is an open empirical question, which should be the central focus of a global sociology of religion, how these ongoing global processes of secularization, sacralization, and religious denominationalism are mutually interrelated in different civilizations, sometimes symbiotically, as in religious nationalist fusions, or in the religious defense of human rights, but often antagonistically, as in the

violent conflicts between the sacred secular immanent norm of freedom of expression and transcendent theistic norms, which believers want to protect from blasphemy.

Let me reiterate once again that global humanity is becoming simultaneously more religious and more secular, but in significantly different ways, in different types of secular regimes, in different religious traditions and in different civilizations. What characterizes our contemporary global secular age is the fact that, as pointed out by the German sociologist Hans Joas, “faith is an option” that cannot be taken for granted. That means that both, “belief and unbelief” become options for individual as well as for communities.

The faiths and beliefs of “unbelievers”

Now that we have examined the conditions of belief and unbelief in our global secular age, we can enter into an examination of the forms and types of modern unbelief. While the social sciences have been studying, religion, religious phenomena and religious beliefs and practices for over two hundred years, research on the other of religion, on the secular, is only in its beginning stage. Indeed, until very recently, the sociology of religion in the West, particularly in Europe, was singlehandedly dedicated to the study of secularization, that is, to document the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern secular societies. But practically, no social scientist expressed any interest in studying the secular.

Apparently social scientists had been working under the assumption of what Charles Taylor has called “the subtraction theory” of the secular. Namely, the secular was understood to be the natural anthropological substratum that subsists once the super-structural unnecessary addition of the supernatural is removed. As anthropological natural, therefore, the secular can be taken for granted and does not need to be studied.

It was only 20 years ago that the anthropologist Talal Asad expressed for the first time the need to develop an anthropology of the secular. Since then, calls for the development of a comparative sociology and phenomenology of the secular and for the comparative research in multiple types of secularities and secularisms have proliferated.

Above all, it was the dramatic growth of “the nones” in the United States in the last decades, particularly among the younger generations, that has fostered the interest in examining the beliefs and worldviews of “unbelievers.” In this context, the project Templeton on “The Faiths and Beliefs of Unbelievers”, under which today’s lecture is taking place, is of enormous relevance. Particularly significant is to attempt to develop comparative analyses of “the nones” in Eastern (post-Soviet) and in Western European societies.

The “nones” as a category refers simply to those who in sociological surveys in the United States, when asked for their religious affiliation mark the category “none” which appears at the bottom of a long list of religious denominations (such main line Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.). In this respect, it refers simply to those who claim no religious affiliation. The proportion of nones in the United States in the last two decades has grown significantly from ca. 8% of the population in the year 2000 to ca. 24% of the population today. Further inquiries, however, have shown that the “nones” can be subdivided into three different categories: a) “unaffiliated religious” (which in Europe tend to be characterized as “believing without belonging”), b) “spiritual not religious”, or individual spiritual seekers, and c) “unbelievers” proper, a group which includes reflexive agnostics, secular humanists, and atheists, as well as simply unreflexive unbelievers.

Following this classification, I am going to briefly explore these four categories from a global comparative perspective.

A) Believers without Belonging

Secularization in Western Europe has taken primarily the form of “unchurching” (i.e. *Entkirchlichung*), which can best be understood as a form of liberation from the type of territorialized confessional religiosity, which was the legacy of the Westphalian system and its dynamics of state-enforced confessionalization under the principle *cuius regio eius religio*, that is, the sovereign determines the religious confession of his subjects. European Christianity, for all kinds of reasons, never made the full historical transition from territorial national churches based on the territorial parish or *Pfarrgemeinde*, to competing religious denominations in civil society based on voluntary religious associations, which following Tocqueville’s analysis one can see as the paradigmatic form of modern religious community. In this respect, Europeans tend to break away from their national churches without ever looking for alternative religious communities. They simply become unaffiliated.

Public opinion surveys make evident that while there has been a drastic decline in church affiliation and in church religious practices, a majority of the population in most European countries still maintains a general belief in God. But those surveys also make evident that the depth and extent of individual religiosity across Europe is rather low, in so far as those who profess belief in a personal God, those who pray with some regularity, and those who claim to have had some personal religious experience are a small minority in most Western European countries.

The situation in most post-Soviet Eastern European societies is mixed. East Germany and the Czech Republic show no evidence of any significant religious revival and remain as secular as they were under Communist regimes, indeed the two most secularized societies in all of Europe.

Poland despite some mild secularization remains the most religious society in Europe with very high levels of religious belief in God (ca. 95%), of Catholic affiliation (ca. 92%) and, although significantly diminished in comparison to the Solidarity period, it still maintains very high levels of regular religious practice (ca. 50%).

Russia, like most other Eastern Orthodox societies, has evinced a significant religious revival after the fall of communism. Particularly, there has been an increasing self-identification of the majority of the Russian Slavic population as “Orthodox,” from 31% in 1991 to 69% in 2011. Parallel to it, the proportion of the Russian Slavic population who self-identifies as non-religious has decreased at a similar rate from 61% to 22%. However, increasing affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church, does not denote the traditional meaning of allegiance to “the true faith” and “the right doxa,” but rather the modern confessional identity as members of the Russian Orthodox nation, as a typical form of “belonging without believing”, also present in Nordic Lutheran countries. In fact, regular religious practice remains very low, hovering at 4% of the population. Although it rises significantly on Easter and other major holidays, still half of the population claims to never attend church. In terms of the entire population of the Russian Federation, the distribution of believers and unbelievers is the following: Orthodox (43%), other religions (15%), spiritual not religious (25%) and atheist non-religious (13%).

Ukraine shows a deeper religious revival after communism with a highly pluralist and fluid religious field with various competing Orthodox denominations, a significant Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and significant Protestant, Jewish and Muslim minorities. However, the Orthodox majority, hovering around 75%, shows very soft levels of confessionalization. According to the most recent survey from the Razumkov Center in January 2020, one year after the Tomos of

autocephaly to the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the religious affiliation in Ukraine was the following: OCU (34%), UOC-MP (13.8%), simply “orthodox” (27.6), Greek-Catholic (8.2%), Protestants and Evangelicals (1%), other religions (1%), non-denominational Christians (8.8%), and non-believers (5.6%). Together, “the simply Orthodox” and the “simply Christian,” both forms of believing without denominational belonging, constitute over 36% of the Ukrainian population. The proportion of atheists and unbelievers has decreased significantly in the last decades, and is less than 1% in the Western oblasts and less than 10% in the Eastern and Southern oblasts. Regular church attendance reaches 21%, with significant difference between the Western oblasts (34%) and the Eastern and Southern oblasts (13%). Among the church affiliated, regular church attendance is higher, ca. 32% of Orthodox and ca. 45% of Greek Catholics attend church weekly. Even among the unaffiliated (“simply orthodox” and “simply Christian”) weekly church attendance nears 10%, a proportion which is much higher than in Russia. Those data are particularly significant, if one considers the fact that over 60% of the Ukrainian population indicate that they were not brought up religiously at home.

The condition of believing without belonging has been the traditional condition of religious life in most cultures of Asia for millennia. Most Asian religions until very recently had no tradition of religious affiliation or membership, and no normative tradition of regular weekly temple attendance. Thus, a majority of the population in China or Japan, when asked about their religious affiliation may also indicate “none of the above”, when in fact they may follow Confucian ethics, may visit indiscriminately diverse temples (Buddhist, Taoist, Shinto, etc) and may offer regularly gifts and prayers to their ancestors in their home altar.

B) Spiritual, Not Religious

This is a category which has attained increasing relevance in the modern secular Age. It denotes particularly a negative attitude towards institutional organized religion, with a reluctance to identify oneself as a non-believing secular materialist. It signifies a relative openness towards some form of transcendence, which may have the most diverse expressions: from the “seekers” of individual paths of self-expression, such as the forms described by Robert Bellah as “Sheilaism” and by Thomas Luckmann as “invisible religion;” to those “seekers” who are attuned to various paths of Eastern mysticism, such as yoga or Buddhist meditation; to various forms of “New Age” spirituality; to diverse forms of “spiritism” and “animism,” which find expression in interest in “the occult” and paranormal phenomena, as well as in “gnostic” forms of science fiction, Manichean cosmic struggles and extraterrestrial life.

The category of “spiritual not religious” takes diverse forms throughout the globe: it is perhaps less relevant in highly secular post Christian Western Europe, with some significant exceptions in Scandinavia and the British Isles; as already indicated, it is widespread in post-Soviet Russia (25%); it is significant throughout the Americas from the United States to Brazil, the land where the most diverse forms of “espiritismo” flourish; “animism” and “spiritism” permeates all African cultures and most Asian cultures.

It also finds high intellectual expression in many of the manifestos of avant-garde modernist art, from abstract cubism to surrealism and futurism; in self definitions of the spiritual East against the materialist West; and in all kinds of critique of materialist capitalism, most significantly in the growing ecological consciousness, that finds such diverse expressions as vegetarianism, “green movements”, and reverence for living nature, mother Earth and the cosmos.

C) Reflexive rejectionists of theist transcendence: agnostics, secular humanists, and atheists.

Modern reflexive atheism denies the existence of God for any of three related rationales: a) radical agnosticism which for cognitive-epistemological reasons denies the very possibility of postulating such a supra-empirical or supernatural reality or of making meaningful assertions about such reality on linguistic analytical grounds; b) self-sufficient secular humanism that rejects any transcendence beyond human flourishing as a form of theo-nomic dependency that deprives humans of their autonomy or as otherworldly projection that wastes human energies in futile otherworldly pursuits that should be redirected toward this-worldly utilitarian pursuits: and c) radical anti-theists that reject on moral grounds the existence of an unjust God responsible for an imperfect universe or for the suffering and injustices of humanity.

To all three rationales one can respond with the famous anecdote of the person who, during the times of the troubles in Northern Ireland, crossing a checkpoint from a Catholic to a Protestant neighborhood, was confronted with an armed militia man, who cried “hands up”, “Catholic” or “Protestant”? No, no, he responded, “I am an atheist”! Yes, but which one?”

There is no such a thing as atheism in the abstract. In concrete terms, which is the God one denies? Is it a post-Protestant, a post-Catholic, post-Jewish, post-Muslim, post-Hindu, post-Buddhist, etc. In the same sense, there is no secularity in the abstract, the multiple forms of secularity are so many transformations of religious experiences and world-views. That is the reason, why it is necessary to develop a comparative sociology, anthropology, and phenomenology of the multiple forms of secularity, as forms of diverse post-religious experiences.

D) Unreflexive secularity: being simply secular, without religion

At least in Europe, this is probably the most-widespread, almost taken for granted, form of unbelief. Self-contained, self-sufficient secularity is tied to the phenomenological experience of living without religion as a normal, quasi-natural, taken for granted reality. The naturalization of “unbelief” or “irreligiosity” as the normal “modern” human condition is a characterization that certainly applies to a majority of Western post-Christian societies.

Self-sufficient secularity, that is, the absence of religion has a better chance of becoming the normal taken for granted position, if it is experienced not simply as an unreflexive, naïve condition, as just a fact, but actually it is perceived as the meaningful result of a quasi-natural process of development.

As Taylor has pointed out, modern unbelief is not simply a condition or absence of belief, nor merely indifference. It is ahistorical condition that requires the perfect tense, a “a condition of having overcome” the irrationality of belief. Intrinsic to this phenomenological experience is a modern stadial consciousness, inherited from the Enlightenment, which understands this anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief as a process of maturation and growth, “as a coming of age”, and as progressive emancipation.

For Taylor, this stadial phenomenological experience serves to ground the experience of exclusive humanism as the positive self-sufficient and self-limiting affirmation of human flourishing and as the critical rejection of transcendence as self-denial and self-defeating.

This historical self-understanding of secularism has the function of confirming the superiority of our modern secular outlook over other supposedly earlier and therefore more primitive religious forms of understanding. To be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication to be religious means to be somehow not fully modern. This is the ratchet effect of a modern historical

stadial consciousness which turns the very idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression.

This secularist stadial consciousness is a crucial factor in the widespread secularization that has accompanied the modernization of Western European societies. Europeans tend to experience their own secularization, that is, the widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices in their midst as a natural consequence of their becoming modern individuals. In this respect the European theory of secularization mediated through this historical stadial consciousness tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In non-European societies, where processes of modernization are not associated phenomenologically with such a historical stadial consciousness, the experience of modernity may be associated not with secularity but with different forms of religious revival and individual religious affirmation.

But following Max Weber one may postulate that the death of God in Nietzschean terms, opens the way for new forms of modern polytheism in which individuals can freely choose the gods they prefer to worship: Eros/Venus, Athena, Mars, Mammon, etc. One is reminded of the classic film by Passolini, *Theorema*, in which each member of the family seeks salvation through the most diverse paths and practices.

Here is where the project on “The Faith and Beliefs of Unbelievers” is extremely promising, if it is able to illuminate the values which drive and inform the worldviews and practices of ordinary modern unbelievers in different national and societal contexts.