



Secularization or Desecularization: My Teaching Experience^I

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Abstract:

This article is about my observation of the state of religion in my society according to my teaching experience. To put my experience in its context and to provide a framework for my discussion, I first refer to the two basic theories about the relation between religion and the modern world: the theory of secularization and the theory of desecularization. The basic argument of proponents of the secularization thesis was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand and religion is on a pilgrimage from public significance to private meaning. In the second part of twenty century several events such as the Islamic revolution in Iran were taken for granted as showing that religion is back on the public agenda. The resurgence of political Islam in Iran should not interpret as emergence of fundamentalism. To delineate correctly the state of religion in my society, I shall try to clarify a typology of religiosity, on the basis of which I shall indicate to my observation: the governmental religiosity, hereditary religiosity and scholarly individual religiosity. These three types of religiosity operate in the three social levels and interact with each other, and condition each other in both a downward and an upward direction. The religious government and religious household are background of my students and condition my teaching. The scholarly individual religiosity results from the combination of the eye of outsider / nonbeliever arising from western studies of Islam I use in my classroom and the eye of insider / believer of Islamic sources. This scholarly religiosity in its turn in an upward direction influences two other types of religiosity.

Keywords: religion; secularization; desecularization; political Islam; modernization.

I am neither empirical researcher nor social or religious theorist, I speak of my observation of religion in the society I live and reflect my experience as instructor of Islamic history and connect it with the mainstream theory about the relation between religion, politics and social life in the modern world^{II}: the secularization theory. Casanova, one of the well-known theorist of secularization, suggests that secularization should be thought of as a three-fold phenomenon—the decline of religion, the differentiation of the secular spheres, and the privatization of religion (Casanova, 2006, pp7-8). The traditional version of secularization theory involved a two-fold claim: that modernization is a universal process that has similar features everywhere and that secularization is inseparable from modernization. The underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. In the mid of twenty century sociologists of religion confidently predicted the decline of religion as a result of modernization. Proponents of the secularization thesis agreed that, since the beginnings of modernity, religion and politics have been continually disconnected and decoupled on the level of institutions and social structure, as well as in the domain of culture and world views^{III}.

But several events in the second part of twentieth century, among them the Islamic revolution in Iran, were taken for granted as showing that religion is back on the public agenda and religious convictions have been used for public interests (Casanova, 1994, p3). From the outside perspective religion was seen as a power useful for political transformation processes; and from the inside perspective religious people and groups agreed that their belief has not only a private but also a public dimension.

^I - This article was delivered first at “Konferenz zum Thema Secularization and its implications” in Universität Postdam, 25-31 August, 2014.

^{II} - For the relation between politics and religion from cultural perspectives see Bernhard Giesen and Daniel Suber, 2005.

^{III} - For other views on the secularization theory see David Martin, 2005, and Rob Warner, 2010.

Although religion in some modern societies continues to become ever more privatized, there are several indicators of religions gaining increasing public relevance.

The limitation of the concept of privatization is obvious when explaining the public presence of religion: religious institutions refuse to accept their assigned marginal place in the private sphere; political parties debate religious symbols and values. It lies in the self-conception of religions to move beyond their subsystem. In this respect when Islam sees itself as a way of life, this claim has not only private significance, but also aims toward public influence: in the organization of work, public holidays, jurisdiction, family life, educational system, the evaluation of modern technologies, moral questions and so forth.

Most sociologists of religion came to agree that the original secularization thesis was untenable in its basic form, which simply said modernization and secularization are necessarily correlated developments. By now there is much academic talk about the limitations and failures of the conventional secularization thesis and much has consequently been written about religious revivalism. A well-known self-critical quote of a former protagonist of the theory of secularization, Peter L. Berger, goes as follows: 'My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever' (Berger, 1999, p2). One of the most interesting questions, he continues, in the sociology of religion today is not, How do you explain fundamentalism in Iran? but, Why is Western Europe different? (Berger, 1997, p974).

It is true that with the Islamic revolution in Iran the religion conquered the political system and has entered the public sphere after a period of marginalization, but the state of religion is not fundamentalism as Peter L. Berger supposed. To delineate correctly the state of religion in my society and thus to provide a framework and context for my observation and experience, I identify three types of religiosity: governmental religiosity, hereditary religiosity and scholarly religiosity. The governmental religiosity, determines the framework in which I and my students can advance our discussion. The hereditary religiosity makes the religious background of my students, and the scholarly religiosity is the result of debates and discussions that constitute my teaching experiences.

I acknowledge that these three types of religiosity presuppose each other in terms of the three social levels where they operate. Religious phenomena at the macro level of political system (governmental), those at the meso level of household, and those at the micro level of individuals, condition each other in both a downward and an upward direction. Downward conditioning occurs via the influence of structural, macro level phenomena on household relation at meso level, which in their turn affect individual religiosity at micro level. Upward conditioning occurs because individual religiosity co-determines developments in meso level religious institutions, which in their turn influence religious phenomena at macro level. Systems theory tends to emphasis downward conditioning, while action theory concentrates mainly on upward conditioning. Applying any of these two theories is needed to empirical data which are not available for me. Thus what I say is merely my personal perception and a general sketch.

I as an educator of Islamic studies teach in a country with religious government that I have to consider all of its requirements and the religious background of the students who have grown in religious families. These two political and social levels in a downward direction condition and influence the formation of individual scholarly religiosity in academic milieu. It is within this context that I and my students participate in classroom discussion and debate on two different texts: the Islamic sources of Islamic history and the western studies of Islam. Not all books written by western scholars, as P. Crone and M. Cook noted in their preface to *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, are ones "written by infidels for infidels" and ones which any believing Muslim cannot accept". Some western studies, among them I can mention Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* and William Montgomery Watt's *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad At Medina*, have attempted as much as possible to be fair and to do justice to their subject-matters. Although we do not regard western accounts on the Islamic history as a replacement of Muslim accounts by more plausible and historically more reliable accounts, we make ourselves familiar with their different methods and perspectives, and through them view ourselves from the eyes of others.

The dialectic of the view of beholder/insider/believer of Islamic sources and the view of inattentive/outsider/nonbeliever of western studies of Islamic history brings about a type of religiosity that I name individual scholarly religiosity. This type of religiosity in its turn in an upward direction influences two other types of household and governmental religiosity.

To sum up:

1- The resurgence of Islam in the Middle East and parts of Asia in the last decades of twenty century, which the theory of desecularization explains, should not be regarded specially in the case of Iran as the emergence of fundamentalism.

2- In a religious society that its political system and other institutions (including household/family institution) are religious, religion and religiosity are complicated phenomena. There are various types of religiosity that influence and condition each other.

3- My observation and experience as educator of Islamic history in the academic milieu is that using western studies of the Islamic history in classroom and the dialectic of the beholder/insider/believer view of Islamic sources and the inattentive/outsider/nonbeliever of western studies bring about a type of individual scholarly religiosity which in long term can influence and condition social and political structure of society.

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