‘Secularisation’ and ‘Religion’ as Zombie Categories?

Adam Possamai

University of Western Sydney

A Review Essay on


Abstract

The article reviews three recent pieces of work on secularisation and religion as social scientific concepts. It also brings into the discussion Beck’s recent proposal for a methodological cosmopolitanism and argues for the move of sociology of religion towards this new paradigm.

David Martin’s On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory is a collection of his articles, keynote addresses and conference papers written and presented between 2002 and 2004. This book is an up-to-date reflection of this key sociologist of religion who dedicated four decades of his life to the critique of the concept of secularisation. Indeed, Martin was one of the first sociologists to critique this concept in 1969 in the European Journal of Sociology, which became the first chapter of his key 1978 book General Theory of Secularisation. In the ’70s, he studied Christianity in the Western world, and moved in the ’80s and ’90s to the study of the same religion.
(more specifically Pentecostalism) in, especially, Latin America. His latest book is simply a collection of his most recent research which gives a ‘face lift’ to his seminal book of almost 30 years.

Although each chapter is of great interest in itself, the book fails to give a coherent structure to the contemporary secularisation debate. If the author had reworked his thirteen chapters as one coherent piece of work, we would have certainly have had a ‘complete’ revised general theory rather than one that leads ‘towards’ one; as indeed the title suggests. Nevertheless, the reader is easily submerged in the knowledge and academic talent of this great sociologist when reading a chapter at a time. For this reason, I recommend the book to any researcher who has already worked in this field. This book is certainly not an introductory text and I would not recommend it for undergraduate students in the first two years of their degree.

Martin uses Casanova’s definition of secularisation as the most workable one; that is, the one on social differentiation, ‘meaning by that the increasing autonomy of the various spheres of human activity’ (123) which is part of the more general process of modernisation. Indeed, religion has no longer the place it had in societal structure and is no longer the dominant voice when it comes, for example, to politics, welfare and education. If religion is still strong in our culture, it is not the yesteryear pillar of our social structure. Moving beyond this *fait accompli* for many social scientists of religion, Martin’s work pushes further our understanding of this process by underlining the different dynamics of secularisation, rather than simply assuming a single one as in many previous sociological studies. The fundamental argument of this book is that secularisation (which is part of the modernisation process) is not a clear-cut process that happens in all Western societies homogenously or that will happen to all Westernised developing countries. Indeed, as the author states:

> instead of regarding secularization as a once-for-all unilateral process, one might rather think in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils. Each Christianization is a salient of faith driven into the secular from a different angle, each pays a characteristic cost which affects the character of the recoil, and each undergoes a partial collapse… (3)

This reflects a multilateral view of the process of secularisation that assumes that it is not only different between, for example, North America and Europe, but is also distinctive within each of these cultural/geographical spaces. Martin’s book is excellent in the way it draws meticulous differences between the various secularisation processes from one nation to another. For this reason, we, as social scientists, should not believe like the theologian Milbank (1990) that the whole sociological discourse is so self-contained in

---

1. One of Karel Dobbelaeere’s (2002) three level of secularisation. See below.

its uni-linear approach to secularisation that is beyond correction. We should rather follow Martin who claims it is possible to pursue instead the sociology of religion in a spirit of sympathetic understanding of the various aspects of faith. By understanding that there is not one secular ending to our history but rather various phases of secularisation and sanctification, Martin moves beyond Milbank’s critiques and justifies the strength of the discipline.

Martin’s articulation of ‘multiple secularisations’ aligns itself with the very recent concept of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000). For Eisenstadt,

The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world—indeed to explain the history of modernity—is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views of what makes societies modern. (Eisenstadt 2000: 2)

The main point of the multiple modernities thesis is that the modernities outside of the Western world cannot fully be understood with the same categories and concepts used to understand Western modernity. Indeed, following this Western imposition on social transformations and ideals, Martin reminds us how the concept of ‘secularisation’ became an ‘ideological and philosophical imposition on history rather than an inference from history’ (19). One can also remember Martin’s (1995) earlier work considering the studies of Durkheim and Weber on the crisis of religious consciousness in modernity, which were so strong that secularisation became the undisputed paradigm among sociologists and thus was not regarded as deserving much study after the First World War. By understanding secularisation as a multilateral process, a type of ‘multiple secularisations’ thesis, Martin gives to researchers of religion a strong way out from this ideological imposition.

It should be noted that Martin’s work on the secularisation process is focused on the horizontal level. In contrast to his work, Dobbelëære (2002) does not work on the different dynamics of secularisation (horizontal process) like Martin but on its different levels (vertical process). For Dobbelëære, there are three levels. The first one is Societal Secularization (also called in his terms ‘laïcisation’ for the societal or macro level). It deals with the change of structure, which occurred with the industrialisation of Western societies, and refers to a functional differentiation process which occurred through modernisation(s). Through this process many subsystems (e.g. state,

2. It is worth noting that this term has already been challenged by Schmidt (2006) who proposes instead ‘Varieties of Modernity’ to reflect institutional differences rather than cultural ones, as in Eisenstadt’s theory.
economy, science) are developed and perform different functions that are structurally different. Religion, as an institution, is thus no longer an overarching institution but one of many. This is basically the definition of secularisation given by Casanova above. The second dimension is Organisational Secularization (also called in his terms ‘religious change for the organisation or meso level) and reflects changes at the level of religious organisations, such as churches, denominations, sects and new religious movements. At this level, the study of the decline and emergence of certain types of religious groups can be conducted. The final dimension, Individual Secularization (also called ‘religious involvement’ for the individual or micro level), refers to the individual level and deals with the way an individual believes in a specific religion and how this person is integrated in a religious group. Both Dobbelaere and Martin have touched on two separate axes of analysis of secularisation(s) and both can thus be used for a comparative analysis of each type of secularisation process. Using Martin’s theories, one could thus claim that Australia has experienced a specific modernisation process, and thus a specific type of secularisation and de-secularisation process as well. But how to distinguish it from other countries such as the USA and the UK? With the use of a vertical analysis of secularisation, a researcher would then be able to compare and contrast each level of Dobbelaere’s typology between each of these countries and then draw out similarities and differences.3

Although the theoretical work of Martin covers many areas of the world, these countries remain mainly Christian. He did use Turkey (62-64) as the best case study of a more Islamic country for the application of the secularisation theory and he openly admits that this application proves resistant. This indeed calls for further work on the secularisation thesis outside—but not excluding—a Christian point of view and world. As it can be argued that secularisation depends much on what one sees in religion, we need to move to a post-Christian approach to look at secularisation without a culturally trained Judeo-Christian eye. Since Christianity, according to Martin (78), ‘embodies a dialectic of the religious and the secular which more easily generates secular mutation of faith rather than straightforward replacements and displacements’, one is not surprised to discover that Martin’s theory of secularisation fits with his view of Christianity rather than someone’s else view from another religion. Indeed, as the author touches upon towards the end of the book, ‘If secularization carries different emphases and meanings in the dominant and subordinate traditions of Christianity, it carries strikingly different meanings when one compares Christianity and Islam’ (173).

Although Martin furthers the secularisation debate, I am left wondering what a post-Christian piece of work encompassing Martin and Dobbelaere’s research would offer to social scientists.

3. Incidentally, I am currently working on this project.
Taking into account the changes in our global world, and the rise of multiculturalism and ‘multicreedism’, Martin does excellent work in outlining the secularisation processes between nations and areas of culture. However, I would argue that his approach is still that of ‘methodological nationalism’. To explain this, I will now refer to the work of Beck.

To reflect this shift in focus in our global life, Ulrich Beck (2002, 2006) refers to the need for social scientists to move to a ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ as opposed to the ‘methodological nationalism’ that we have all used and are still using as cultural and social scientists. By ‘methodological nationalism’, Beck makes reference to social scientists who adopt categories of practice as categories of analysis within a national framework. As Beck (2006: 4) points out: ‘The decisive point is that national organizations as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as the orienting reference point for the social scientific observer’. By ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’, he makes reference to a still to be constructed new theoretical and methodological paradigm that would work with new concepts and methods applicable to the transnational aspect of our societies. Indeed, realities inside and outside the nation-state are rapidly changing and we need to get rid of what Beck calls the ‘zombie categories’; these are living dead categories within a national framework that we still use in research and are no longer applicable in a cosmopolitan society. A good example of a zombie category might be the concept of ‘secularisation’; a concept which, as Davie (2004) points out, does not seem to work well outside of a European framework. As modernity is not a uniform idea and espouses different shapes in different places, it is in Europe only that the connection between secularisation and modernisation is relatively strong. As Davie (2004: 83) concludes her article: ‘the conceptual tools that emerge from the European case may not be appropriate elsewhere. We need instead to search for new approaches and new understandings in order to understand fully the nature of religion in the modern world—both within and outside Europe’. There is no doubt that by moving to a post-Christian/post-Western understanding of secularisation, sociology of religion will be able to step closer to Beck’s ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’.

Although Martin would argue that the concept of ‘secularisation’ needs to stay as is and is a living category, Debray’s Les communions humaines. Pour en finir avec la ‘religion’ [Human Communion: For an Ending to ‘Religion’] asks the reader to stop using the concept of religion altogether. We could indeed find here a move towards methodological cosmopolitanism that is worth investigating. In two wonderful chapters, the Professor of Philosophy from Lyon and the past president of the Institut Européen en Sciences des Religions (IESR) demonstrates how the word ‘religion’ emerged in Latin with the birth of Christianity. Indeed, the word as we understand it is not found in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek and Arabic. In these languages, Debray explores
non-Western words such as Adharma in Sanscrit, Dat in Hebrew, Thrèskeia in Greek and Din in Arabic, that we translated as religion, but these translations are only approximations and do not adequately reflect the meaning of these words in their original context. The author points out how the word ‘religion’ has become a universal entity emerging from a locality; that is the Roman Christian one. Christianism was not born a religion (the notion was unthinkable in the Jewish culture), and did not grow into one during the first two centuries of the Christian era because Christian theologians had their thoughts formulated within a Greek language which ignored this Latin category. It only became a religion—in the sense of the word as we know it—in the third century. This was simply a political move from Christians to view themselves as a religion so their faith would become a valid belief system in the Roman world. Before Constantine, Christianity was seen in the Roman world as superstition (pejorative) and thus perceived negatively as, if I may be allowed this divergence, ‘cults’ in current Western societies. Christianity had to become a religio (laudatory) to be accepted by the mainstream and to be able to develop in the Roman world. In 341, the appropriation of the Latin word religio became so successful that Christianity became religio and roman paganism superstition. This reversal of perspectives that established Christianity as the official religion clearly demonstrates power issues and labelling politics.

In the sense used by Beck above, the word ‘religion’ would definitely be regarded as a zombie category for Debray and would thus in this sense need to be ‘beheaded’. Not stopping short of critiques, Debray attempts to move the argument further and then proposes the word ‘communion’ instead. The author admits that this term comes out of a Christian paradigm but nevertheless attempts to justify its use in other religions (I will, however, keep using the word religion for the sake of this review article). Although he continues to explore other religious and linguistic groups, his arguments for the use of ‘communion’ are poor and unconvincing. Debray does not give a clear definition of ‘communion’ and makes reference instead to its organic solidarity attribute. What counts for the author is the sociation aspect of ‘communion’; the social glue that links all believers. His proposal is simply the use of Durkheim’s functional definition of religion (without acknowledging it) by simply changing the word ‘religion’ to ‘communion’. The author is then quick to include in his new definition of religion, civil religion, which seems to be a very positive attribute for Debray who promotes himself as a laïque. 4 Although his critiques of the word ‘religion’ are well elaborated and convincing, his arguments for the use of ‘communion’ are weak and far from being engaging.

4. A francophone style of secularist. It is a word which has no clear equivalent in the English language and refers to the absence of religion in the public sphere, notably the State and the school system.
Having worked towards a definition of religion/communion, Debray is then not afraid to undermine the validity of spiritualities (something he sees as disconcerting) viewing them as too focussed on the self and thus unable to provide any social glue. Because these spiritualities do not have a linking power (something that I have discredited elsewhere—see Possamai 2005), he does not hesitate to take them out of his new definition of religion instead of re-evaluating his own work. Further, it becomes a paradox to Debray’s argument to point out that Dukheim himself predicted these spiritual changes towards individualism in modern societies. As Westley (1978: 137) commented on the French sociologist almost 30 years ago: ‘He [Durkheim] suggests that as a society characterized by unilateral kin group affiliations produced a totemic religion, so a highly specialized and diversified society will produce highly specialized, diversified and individualistic religion’. Needless to say, Debray can be criticised for his rather biased approach to the field. Having laid down his own definition of religion/communion, which does not move much further from Durkheim’s work, he limits his views within a traditional functionalist paradigm. Paradoxically, his book was as keen to exclude spiritualities from his definition as to include laïcité in it; as if he wants to put ‘religion’ and laïcité at the same ideological and political level in his new definition of ‘communion’. Since the first part of the book demonstrates the politics of labelling with the word ‘religion’, much can be discovered if we think that he uses the same stratagem for his ‘communion’ label. If only the author had bothered to come back to the elementary differentiation between a functional and substantive definition of religion, his argument would have been enriched; but by doing this he would have had to undermine his own ideology.

For those who can read French, I found the writing style accessible and enjoyable. There were many subtle plays on words and many bons mots. However, in terms of its content, I would only recommend the first three chapters (out of eight) of the book, which criticise the use of the word ‘religion’ by using novel approaches. I would not recommend the remaining five chapters to anyone who is familiar with the work of Durkheim. As this book summarises Dubray’s essential works on religion and laïcité over at least the last ten years, I would have expected the last five chapters to be much more engaging.

Without using the work of Beck, Kim Knott’s *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* might be the book that offers the sociology of religion a first step towards ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’; one that could help us move towards a post-Christian understanding of religion and secularisation. The main aim of her book is to develop a spatial methodology to examine religion in Western modernity in the hope for new insights. As she herself claims:

My aim in terms of the theory of space, place, and location are three-fold: to reflect upon space as a medium in which religion is situated; to develop a spatial strategy for examining the relationship between religion and its apparently secular context; and to consider the spaces produced by religions, religious groups, and individuals in contemporary Western societies. For this study then space is seen as a medium, a methodology, and an outcome (3).

By space, Knott is not limited to the material dimension and she also includes the metaphorical, physical and imagined ones.

The first part of the book is dedicated to theories of space and how these can apply to religion and secularisation. The work of Lefèbvre on his Critique of Everyday Life is her starting point and her key approach to space. She then moves to study postmodern spaces and especially the analysis of power caught up in the spaces occupied and produced by religion. The book thus moves from the modernist grounding of ‘place’ to the postmodernist abstraction of ‘space’. The second part of the book is focused on an application of her new theories in the light of religion. Although the first aim of the author was to apply these new theories on the location at different scales, such as in a body part, a thing, a community and a locality, Knott admits the too-large scope of these applications and decides instead to focus the second part of the book on a body part only, that of the left hand. Through this left hand, she is able to demonstrate with various case studies that religion in its many guises is variously located in a range of contemporary representations.

Using the work of Lefèbvre, Knott argues that the left-hand generates spaces which are produced by and for their gestures. These gestural systems embody ideology, for example, a sign of the cross or a clenched-fist salute. Analysing various textual representations, the author argues that the spaces of the right and left hands are politically charged. ‘Right and left are used repeatedly in order to represent particular moral positions and ideological views and to challenge others. They are used variously to authorise and resist’ (208-9). In reference to the sacred, and drawing on case studies such as from Roger Bataille’s description of a French village funeral, Tantrism and Vedism, the author claims that while the right hand connotes order, unity and conformity, the left hand is reserved for impure aspects of the sacred which are usually connected to death, blood and that which is contagious.

What is of great interest in this book is how she establishes the field of not only religion, but of both the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ in which she found a site of struggle with various religious and secular positions, and this includes post-secular actors who seek to bridge both the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, such as undecided agnostics. Instead of viewing the rise and fall of religion or secularisation as it is so common in sociological texts, the author focuses instead on the space of conflict and cooperation between various camps in the field on the ‘religious’/‘secular’. She follows Beckford’s recent
work (2003: 13) on religion and theory. She quotes him: ‘religion is...a particularly interesting “site” where boundary disputes are endemic and where well-entrenched interest groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents’ and then develops his perspective much further. By looking at contested spaces to see what they reveal about the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’, the author proposes a new way of looking at what religion and secularisation mean; they are simply sites of power in which groups try to impose their personal view and their agenda. A good example of this is the book by Régis Debray reviewed in this article, in which the author rightly critiques the notion of religion to create his own concept of ‘communion’, which can then include his laïque/secular views on life; as if, paradoxically, the greatest legitimacy that laïcité/secularisation can ever receive is by being regarded as a religion. This would seem to be timely for Debray as laïcité is losing momentum in a French society in which debates about laïcité can take a religious tone when trying to reassert it as a national value (Willaime 2004).

Bearing this in mind, we might nevertheless have to keep ‘religion’ and ‘secularisation’ as zombie categories for a very long time. As zombie movies do not seem to fade away, these categories will certainly go through a few more ‘remakes’. For Beck’s methodological cosmopolitanism, we need new categories to understand the new world in which we live. Even if the ‘religion’ and ‘secularisation’ categories refuse to die—and should perhaps remain alive even with their weaknesses—inscribing them in the multiple modernities thesis is a move towards this new methodological cosmopolitanism. I believe, thanks to Knott’s work, that what is important for social scientists might not be the categories themselves, but the processes in which the categories are created and maintained. Indeed, what seems to be of importance might not be the right way to define these terms, especially the definitions that would fit with our twenty-first century, but rather to understand them as sites of struggle in which social actors lobby for their definition. As there are multitude of actors from varying social settings, there would be multiple secularisations.

Knott was able to come to this approach with the study of space, however the strongest theoretical weakness of her approach is the total ignorance of the work of Bourdieu on the study of fields. By addressing his works, Knott would have been able to directly address this ‘contested sites’ thesis, rather than arriving at it through a long journey from Lefèbvre to postmodern theorists. This almost circumambulated approach is quite symptomatic of this book. Not only has she passed through theories of space to theories of fields, but she also explores the same theories of space to study—not a conventional space like a city or a temple—but the left hand as part of the body. Although the book would have gained by being more focused by avoiding one dimension (be it space, fields, or the body) of her work, I nevertheless
recommend it as it demonstrates a great insight in the study of religion and secularisation.

In conclusion, I believe that sociologists of religion are forever doomed with zombie categories of ‘religion’ and ‘secularisation’. However, what is of importance for social scientists might no longer be in finding the perfect definition but to study instead the ‘flesh’ of the zombie categories being eaten by various social actors in their multiple definitional processes; the definition given to the label becoming more and more of a political exercise in our cosmopolitan society.

References

Beck, U.

Beck, U., and N. Sznaider

Beckford, J.

Davie, G.

Dobbelaree, K.

Eisenstadt, S.N.

Martin, D.

Milbank, J.

Possamai, A.
2005 In Search of New Age Spiritualities. Ashgate, Aldershot.

Schmidt, V.

Westeley, F.

Willaime, J.