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### **Secularization debates, gender wars and the quantitative-qualitative divide**

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Observatoire des religions en Suisse (ORS)

# Secularization debates, gender wars and the quantitative-qualitative divide.

A comment on the papers by Detlef Pollack, Linda Woodhead and Sophie Lamine

Jörg Stolz

## *Abstract*

*The three papers by Pollack, Woodhead and Lamine each make an original contribution to the state of the art: Pollack introduces and tests individualization theory against secularization and market theory; Woodhead suggests a “gendered” secularization theory; and Lamine points to the complexities of micro-believing. I assess strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. Interestingly, the three authors may be seen as representing three very different and partially conflicting paradigms of thinking about religion and secularization in modern societies. I discuss possibilities of integrating the paradigms.*

## *Introduction*

When I was invited to comment on the three papers by Detlef Pollack, Linda Woodhead and Sophie Lamine, I was pleased to find three clear, concise, state-of-the art texts – but I was also struck by their extreme diversity. I immediately knew that I would be able to comment on their individual contributions. However, would I also be able to say something general about such different approaches? Then it occurred to me that the three contributors were all defending three very different – and partly conflicting – paradigms in current sociology of religion. In fact, each one of them takes a distinctive stance in a current debate and argues against another, equally prominent position: orthodox secularization theory is affirmed against individualization and market theories (Pollack); a “gendered” secularization theory is set against a “male-only” approach (Woodhead); and a qualitative look at religion in modernity is set against quantitative sociology of religion (Lamine). It is easy to see that the orthodox, quantitative approach to secularization defended by Pollack is – at least implicitly – criticized by the gendered and qualitative accounts by Woodhead and Lamine. The goal

of this article is then twofold. First, I will comment on the three papers individually, trying to highlight their original contributions, strengths and possible weaknesses. Second, I discuss if an integration of the various paradigms might improve our thinking about religion in modern societies and under what conditions such an integration might be feasible.

### *Secularization and individualization vs. the market thesis*

Detlef Pollack investigates whether the religious change in Europe supports the secularization thesis, the individualization thesis or the religious market thesis. Secularization thesis claims that modernization will lead to a decline of religious communities, practices and convictions. The individualization thesis holds that modernization will not lead to a decline, but rather to a change of form or religiosity: individuals will increasingly practice in an “independent, individual character” and draw on and combine various religious sources of various religions. The market thesis argues that modernization – if accompanied by pluralism and deregulation – will lead to stronger competition and therefore higher overall religiosity. Evidently, the three theories predict very different effects of modernity, leading to interesting possibilities of testing them with empirical data. Detlef Pollack uses data from a survey he and his team conducted as well as ISSP and Eurobarometer data and looks at both Christian and “extra-church” or “individualized” religiosity. Christian Religiosity is operationalized by the variables of denomination membership, church attendance and belief in God. Extra-church or individualized religiosity is operationalized by belief in astrology, spiritualism and occultism. The findings are as follows. On a descriptive level, we find that church religiosity is indeed declining very clearly in almost all countries, while extra-church religiosity is slightly rising. Pollack points out, however, that extra-church religiosity is not compensating for losses of church religiosity (as individualization theory would have it). Its gains are much too small, and there is no inverse correlation among church and extra-church religiosity. Thus, Pollack writes:

*(...) this change, expressed by a decline in the significance of traditional, institution-bound religiosity and a rise in the significance of non-traditional, extra-church religious tendencies is itself part of the process of religious decline. Thus, the thesis of change in religious forms is not a challenge to, but rather a confirmation of the secularization theory.*

Concerning explanation, Pollack looks at correlations on both the individual and the aggregated (national) level. On the individual level, he finds correlations that support both the secularization theory and the individualization thesis, but do not confirm the market model. Likewise, on the aggregated level, religiosity drops with the rising GDP of a nation state (supporting the secularization theory), but is not significantly correlated to an index of church-state separation (disconfirming the market model). Summarized, Pollack finds that the secularization thesis is verified; the individualization thesis is partly verified – and the economic market thesis is completely and utterly wrong. There is much in the paper to recommend. In my view, Pollack makes a truly original contribution by identifying the “individualization paradigm”, sketching its theoretical reasoning, operationalizing it and testing it against the better known secularization and market theses. The insight that individualization is nothing but a corollary of the modernity-driven secularization process and coincides with the decline of religion is important and the empirical results are – overall – convincing. I might add that they are in accord with most other studies working with a sound methodology, such as those by Norris/Inglehart (2004), Voas/Alasdair (2005), Dobbelaere/Jagodzinski (1995) and others.

I would like to add three critical remarks that might further future research. First, I believe that the paradigm of “individualization” should be operationalized more thoroughly than Detlef Pollack does in this contribution. One should have at one's disposal a large array of items that measure "alternative religiosity", not just two or three questions. After all, according to the theory, individuals will show the same level of religiosity as before, but this religiosity, extremely pluralized, comes from a large reservoir of different religious traditions. Second, I was not very convinced by the operationalization of the independent variables on an individual level concerning the economic market model (agreement with friends) and individualization (exceptional life, religious upbringing). I do not quite see why these variables should really measure religious pluralism and/or regulation and individualized life conditions. Third, since Pollack looks at relationships on both an aggregated and an individual level, the appropriate statistical model would seem to be a hierarchical or “multi-level” one. Models of this kind allow us to look at aggregated and individual effects simultaneously. Let me make another point. It is interesting to note that Detlef Pollack embodies almost perfectly what we might qualify as the dominant, classical paradigm. He defends traditional secularization theory; he uses a hypothetico-deductive kind of

theorizing; he applies quantitative methods, just as the natural sciences would do; and he is – finally but importantly - a man.

### *Gendered secularization vs. male-only models*

The paper by Linda Woodhead may be seen as an important criticism of exactly the kind of dominant position Detlef Pollack defends. According to her, the dominant secularization theory disregards the variable of gender, the situation of women, and consequently can only account for the religious disaffiliation of men, not that of the “other half of the human race” - women. In addition, as much is certainly true - Detlef Pollack never talks about the gender variable in his paper. If indeed gender is as important as Linda Woodhead thinks it is, then the Pollackian position is critically weakened. Linda Woodhead thus seeks to enhance existing explanations of secularization by "gendering" it. This new theory will not just take into account “cultural factors” like value changes, but also “structural factors”. It will specifically look at the fact that in Western societies women have been trapped in a “stalled revolution” (Hochschild). They are expected to be wives and loving mothers at the same time as to enter the workplace and have a professional career. In this difficult structural situation, Woodhead tells us, three types of adaptations are possible, and they each bring a different affinity to religion and religiosity with them. Some women may opt for the traditional roles of wife and mother – leading to a high probability of religiosity. Others may choose a progressive role and go for a professional career; in this case, they will probably “opt out” of religion. Still others may try to combine the two sets of expectations. In this case, the consequences for religion and religiosity are not clear, but for some of these women religion may become important as a compensatory resource. According to Linda Woodhead, this theory can explain puzzling phenomena, such as the fact that secularization has accelerated since the 1960s, that typical churchgoers are now women, that women nevertheless seem to have been leaving churches faster than men have in the last decade, and that women are more prone to exhibit "alternative spirituality". Concerning method, the Woodhead paper does not test its propositions against "data", but is rather a theoretical discussion and a programmatic call for a different kind of secularization theory. I think there are many things that speak for the Woodhead argument. I am convinced that gender is a very important variable to look at when considering secularization. We do indeed find consistently significant differences between men and women, both in traditional and alternative religiosity. I also welcome

the idea to favor a blend of structural and cultural factors in order to explain religiosity and to focus on the specific structural position of many women as an explanatory tool. Furthermore, the Woodhead account is “actor-based”, showing us in a convincing way how structural conditions may lead to different kinds of adaptations, which in turn account for different probabilities of being more or less religious. All of this is original and convincing; no doubt it will influence future thinking about secularization.

I have three critical remarks. First, I feel that Linda Woodhead slightly overstates her point. True, gender might be looked at more closely and with important results. However, it does not seem to be the case that research on secularization so far has neglected the gender issue. There is a substantial sociological literature - both theoretical and empirical - on the influence of gender on religiosity in general and on what it means for the religiosity of women when they are incorporated into the industrial work-process specifically (to name but a few and from different decades: Sullins 2006, Hayes 1996, Campiche 1996, Ulbrich / Wallace 1984, Azzi/Ehrenberg 1975, Lenski 1953). Furthermore, gender is routinely used in practically all empirical models that look at the explanation of religiosity over time. The variable “gender” is almost always significant even in multivariate models. Thus, I feel that Linda Woodhead’s theorizing is original and important; however, one can say neither that secularization theory has overlooked the gender variable so far, nor that existing secularization theory is valid only for men. Second, while I found the threefold typology of women and their different probability of becoming religious interesting, I missed a clear link to the puzzling phenomena with which Linda Woodhead started out. How exactly – to take just one example - can this typology explain the fact that women seem to be leaving churches faster than men? Third, Linda Woodhead does not really tell us in her text how her theory should be tested. Is she telling us that we should operationalize her typology in quantitative surveys, say, with the variables “professional status”, “marital status” and “number of children”? However, if so – do quantitative surveys not already use these variables routinely in order to explain differences in religiosity?

### *Qualitative vs. quantitative approaches*

The third contribution by Anne-Sophie Lamine can again be seen as a vigorous attack on the "old paradigm", not from a gender perspective, but from an essentially qualitative and micro-sociological approach. Lamine’s central question is (I paraphrase): how can

individuals - through beliefs - relate to transcendence in a modern plural world? She starts out by showing us a variety of findings by qualitative researchers. They all show that “to believe” is a very complex, ambiguous, fluctuating phenomenon.

*Des catholiques croient à la résurrection et n’y croient pas vraiment (...). Des membres d’une église évangélique croient que seuls eux seront sauvés, mais croient aussi que certains catholiques de leur connaissance le seront également (...). Une jeune femme retourne à un judaïsme très orthodoxe et en même temps critique cette orthodoxie (...). Des musulmans héritiers de mouvements militants islamistes en viennent à mettre en avant la religion comme épanouissement de soi (...).*

Lamine seeks for a theoretical framework able to capture these kinds of phenomena. She accomplishes this by interpreting and combining theoretical ideas by Albert Piette, Thomas Luckmann and Georg Simmel. In the work of every one of these authors, she finds a different element of the answer to her question. Very briefly, Albert Piette tells us that individuals have to believe in a minor mode, that is, in a "messy", changing, reflective, way. Thomas Luckmann shows that individuals have to believe in a way in which secular and religious transcendence are intimately linked (*continuité entre le religieux et le non-religieux*). Our experience is full of small and middle, and only sometimes large (and religious) transcendences. Moreover, Georg Simmel demonstrates that individuals believe in an emotional and contradictory way. The paper by Anne-Sophie Lamine is an original contribution in that it highlights empirical research on how people actually believe and suggests a new theoretical framework in which we can make sense of these findings.

I find the idea that a combination of the three concepts by Piette, Luckmann and Simmel might give us a comprehensive theoretical framework with which to capture “micro-believing” very convincing and important. Again, I add some critical points. First, I agree when Lamine emphasizes the continuum of religious and non-religious belief. Religious and secular beliefs have much in common. They are neither totally religious nor totally secular, but rather are to be seen on a secular-religious continuum. In addition, they can be analyzed and explained like any other beliefs. Even so, there has to be – at least analytically - a distinction between religious and non-religious. What makes us say that the belief that Jesus Christ has been resurrected is “more religious” than, say, the belief that Roger Federer is the greatest current tennis player on earth? Why is Scientology “more religious” than Dianetics? In other words, what are the

criteria with which the continuum is created? In my view, this question cannot be answered without addressing the question of the definition of religion – which is not addressed in Lamine’s paper. Second, the conceptual scheme sketched by Lamine seems to be in need of several additional descriptive points. True, we probably find a “messy” kind of believing in almost everybody, even the “religious virtuosos”. Surely, there are also important differences among different kinds of believers (such as hesitant believers vs. virtuosos). With what theoretical terms and distinctions should we treat these differences? In a similar vein, I wonder how micro-believing has changed over time. Lamine only gives a static picture of believing. However, how does this apply to secularization theory? Has there been an increase in “hesitant, ambiguous believing” during the last decades? How might these descriptions of micro-believing be reconciled with quantitative descriptions of important changes of beliefs during our recent past? Third, in line with many qualitative researchers, Anne-Sophie Lamine limits her contribution to description. However, we need explanation. How can we explain differences in the degree of “messiness of beliefs”? Why are some more hesitant than others? What effect will an increase of religious plurality have on the degree of “hesitancy”? This said, I would like to point out that Anne-Sophie Lamine’s paper can also be seen as a critique of the dominant position represented by Detlef Pollack. Not once does he talk about the questions of the complexities of what it means to “believe” or to be “religious”. “Belief in god” is just taken as given, measured and correlated.

### *Conflict or compatibility of the paradigms?*

Finally, I would like to address the “clash of paradigms” we note when looking at the three papers simultaneously. There seems to be a conflict between orthodox and market theories, gendered and male-only, quantitative and qualitative approaches. Are these positions inherently incompatible? I think not. Rather, I argue that they may well be – at least partially – integrated under certain conditions. Of course, we lose all possibilities of integration if we create different epistemological and ontological paradigms for the different positions. If a quantitative, gendered or qualitative position necessarily implies that one has to accept one or the other of wildly diverging assumptions about social reality and/or the way we can observe/construct reality, then integration is impossible (Lincoln/Guba 2003). In my view, the insistence on these allegedly “necessary” philosophical/epistemological/ontological differences between different paradigms has detrimental effects on our discipline. It is therefore to our advantage if we look at these



different approaches in a technical, pragmatic way (Bryman 1988). We may then ask: Could we show the phenomenon described by Pollack also with qualitative means and would it change anything for his argument if he analyzed his data separately for men and women? How can we validate the Woodhead claims with quantitative and qualitative data and how is her typology related to other sociological variables (like education, socialization, ethnicity)? Could we measure the “complexity” or “hesitancy” of the Lamine paper with quantitative means and even explain it by correlating it with “independent variables”? In my view, such attempts to integrate different “paradigms” are rewarding precisely because they lead us to new questions and possibly to a more comprehensive understanding of our object of research. Various tendencies in general sociology seem to go in this direction. In the field of theory, we find scholars like Hartmut Esser (1993, 1999), who integrate an explanatory and a comprehensive type of sociology. Concerning methodology, multi-method and mixed method studies are becoming increasingly popular (Tashakkori/Teddlie 1998). These are very promising tendencies and our field has everything to gain in following these leads.

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