Secularization or “diffused religion”?

1. Introduction

After the wave of secularization and the more recent development defined as “religious revival”, social scientists studying the religious phenomenon are becoming far more cautious about the use of certain data, which even today give importance to either the secularization or the revival hypothesis (Cipriani 1997; 2000). It has already become apparent that in both cases this process is probably due to a tendency towards the “sociological construction of inconsistency” by means of purely theoretical reasoning, or of a marked use of figures and results which are put together in scientifically unacceptable ways.

If we then examine other hypotheses which on the international level, in the field of sociology of religion, are frequently under discussion, we can see that they are not totally applicable in many cases. In fact, any effort to verify these hypotheses has generally failed.

Thomas Luckmann’s theorization regarding the “invisible religion” (Luckmann 1967) has attracted much attention on the part of sociologists, even though it has not always brought scientific consensus. The idea of a functional substitution of church religion by a series of topics such as “individual autonomy, auto-expression, auto-fulfilment, mobility ethos, sex and familism” has developed parallel to the theory of secularization.

The debate was very lively at that period, as has been well demonstrated first by Karel Dobbelaere (1981) and, lastly, Olivier Tschannen (1992), and involved such authors as Sabino Samele Acquaviva (Italian edn. 1961; 1979), Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark (1965), Hermann Lübbe (1965), Bryan R. Wilson (1966), Peter L. Berger (1967; 1969), Thomas O’Dea (1966), Richard K. Fenn (1969; 1970; 1978), David Martin (1969, with a later addition 1978a).

Today we must ask if we are faced with an absolute novelty or whether, rather, the Luckmann’s “modern religious themes” are nothing more than the sedimentation of pre-existing, more or less subterranean channels, long incorporated in traditional religious modes, and surfacing now not for simply contingent reasons. The lack of research in this regard and the great weight of social control found in some particular historical and geographical contexts may be among these reasons.
An example is provided by the sociological trajectory of the Polish Solidarnosc movement. Its link to the Polish Catholic church was useful for a while. Then, once liberation from the communist system was attained, its influence began to wane, to the point of reducing to a glimmer. Meanwhile, other individualistic and familistic demands had been able to prevail, damaging the previous solidarity between the politico-trade union movement and religious membership. Today, religious practice, though still high in comparison with other European nations, is marking time, indeed retreating, in the face of the new modern demands of the rising generations unaware of the previous experience and, in addition, not averse to welcoming the westernising (and secularising) breezes of consumerism and the use of free time. But this occurred not only because of the passage from one age cohort to the next but also because of prior sources already functioning within the formal, compact facade of solidarity of the past. Thus even in a Poland sacralised to the utmost there were the forerunners of a future secularization in nuce. In fact, “opinion surveys showed a lessening of confidence in the church from 82% in 1990 to 57% in 1992, and a falling acceptance of its involvement in Polish political life” (Jasinska 1995, 451).

To complete the argument one must, however, point out that this has not involved the total supersession of Catholic religious experience, but has rather favoured the regeneration of previously existing impulsions not wholly evident and visible (Erenc/Wszeborowski 1993, Gorlach/Sarega 1993). In short, in the practicing, believing Pole too there was concealed the individualist, familistic subject, wholly inclined towards self-realization and expression. Again, we see the ambiguous, ambivalent character of secularization. It seems to erode the religious institution, but really only assists the principal factors of a very complex acceptance, made up of consensus on values and dissent in fact, of facile decision and conflicting choices. The new mode of belief supplants the church-religion model but re-adapts it to new behavioural spheres which proclaim individual autonomy and independence. This seems not so much different from the Oevermann’s (1995) “structural model of religiosity”.

Luckmann further believes that the modern sacred cosmos has a relative instability depending on the various social strata in which it is active, as proof of its internal incoherence and disarticulation. In fact, Luckmann reminds us, traditional, customary religious themes are re-ordered in the orbit of the secular and the private, especially by the young and urban dwellers. Thus Durkheim’s (1995) prediction of a wholly individual religion would seem to come true.

Robert N. Bellah and collaborators (1985; 1996) define the intensification of individualism by the term “Sheilaism”, as a wholly personal religious form which can thus take the name of the person who embodies it (Sheila Larson). “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism.