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Popular Religions and Multiple Modernities: A Non-Western Perspective

Cristian Parker

Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

Religious diversity and pluralism is increasing all over the world, and globalization is creating a widespread awareness of that. The growing influence of religions in public politics and culture around the world is contradicting conventional narratives of secularization. Indeed, the resurgence of religions in all the continents is tangled in different ways to modernization processes. The main argument of this chapter is that this religious change toward pluralism can be fully understood in the context of multiple modernities theory, provided that it be revised and modified. The key understanding of changes must come from a better insight of popular religions worldwide. Latin American, Eastern Asia and Islam regions are good examples of popular forms of religious revitalization that contrasts with the Northern European case. New ways of producing sense and spiritual search in non-Western areas are framing specific relationships between religion and modernities and bringing about pluralisms. The interweaving of old and new religious traditions is accentuating interculturality and is generating great conditions for the emergence of new types of syncretism and/or sociocultural and even material (and violent) conflicts. The consequence is the development of religious patterns within societies that have a specific and distinctively form of modernity of their own.

Keywords: popular religions, religious pluralism, multiple modernities, new theories of religion, non-Western religions

1. Introduction

Religious diversity and pluralism is increasing all over the world. In fact, religious, rich diversity and plurality are abounding within religions in the world—diversity in both belief and praxis—and globalization is creating a widespread awareness of that [1].

One of the main influences on recent social theory of religion has been the growing influence of religious institutions in public politics and culture around the world [2]. During the twentieth century, the vast majority of Western social theorists had predicted that religion was in decline. Nevertheless the different conventional narratives of secularization have been contradicted by the resurgence of religions—Islam, Hinduism, Christianity—in all the continents interwoven in different ways to modernization processes ([3], pp. 97, 98).

In the Christian world, not only popular Pentecostalism or Neo-Pentecostalism, but other Evangelicals and independent churches as well, are expanding in Latin America, Africa and many Asian countries [4]. New forms of relationship between religion and public sphere are emerging and non-affiliated religious expressions are increasing in the West. Within Islam and Eastern Asian, and Latin American contexts popular religions are lasting, and even invigorating the religious fields. African and ethnic religions are present in transcultural contexts as well as popular forms of Buddhism and eastern religions. New age tendencies are spread all over different continents. New transnational religious movements [5] and old revitalized indigenous religions [6] are emerging in the globalized world. The most successful refiguration of religions and spiritualities flourishes by drawing themselves down into mass society through new technologies of communication and migrations of people and ideas leaving aside elitist expressions of religions.

The main argument of this chapter is that these religious changes toward pluralism can be fully understood in the context of multiple modernities theory [7–10] provided that it be revised and modified. A new sociological approach is needed. The classical sociological concepts and theories, beginning with secularization, must be criticized and replaced with a more complex theoretical view. Latin American, African and Asian historical processes must be compared with what is happening in different regions of the world and not only with the West. World religions are answering each one by their own path to multiple interactions with modernities. The key understanding of changes must come from a better insight of popular religions worldwide. Latin American, Eastern Asia and Islam regions are good examples of popular forms of religious revitalization that contrasts with the Northern European case. They put in evidence the fact that new ways of producing sense and spiritual search in non-Western geo-cultural areas are framing specific relationships between religion and modernities and bringing about new religious pluralisms.

The theoretical and methodological perspective is guided by a conceptual discussion and is based on recent historical and sociological analyses. The critical appraisal of secondary sources and authors who have written recently on the subject is the base of the main set of arguments put forward.

The chapter begins with an introduction and a theoretical discussion on multiple modernities and religion. Section 2 develops a general overview of religious evolution and statistics in the world today. Section 3 goes in deep on the concepts of popular religion and gathers sound data and interpretative approaches to popular religions in Latin America, Eastern Asia and Islamic milieu and in comparative terms with Industrialized Western countries. The texts end with a proposal of a new sociological approach of the subject trying to overcome the classical and predominant paradigm on religion and modernity.

The main interpretative scope of the chapter comes from the three decades experience of the author doing research and publishing scientific works on popular religion, mainly on the Latin American sociohistorical recent evolution. The critical appraisal of the predominant Western-oriented theories of religions is extended to analyze non-Western contexts such as Islam, and Eastern Asian popular religions in countries submitted to rapid modernization processes.

2. Multiple modernities and religions

In search for a theoretical interpretation of this phenomenon, Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernizations [7, 8] reveals insightful. This theory allows us to criticize the classical evolutionary theory of linear and Eurocentric modernization that would drive us directly to secularization. It allows to understand the sociohistorical, ideological and institutional contexts that have given rise to different forms of modernities in the world last century.

Eisenstadt states that:

"The crystallization of modernity has indeed greatly changed or transformed the basic characteristics of political centers and dynamisms. From the point of view of the contents of these centers, the major transformation which has occurred concomitantly with modernity has been the growing secularization of the centers, and the nonacceptance of the givenness of their contents and symbols can indeed be reexamined anew. This change was closely connected with the growing autonomy of the political, cultural, and societal centers, and above all with changes in the relations between the centers and the periphery; with the growing impingement of the periphery on the center and by facilitation of the access to the center by the periphery, by the permeation of the periphery by the center, often culminating in the concomitant tendency toward the obliteration of the differences between center and periphery" ([8], pp. 262-263).

Notwithstanding in recent decades we have observed the resurgence of greater differences between the center and the peripheries in religious terms. Meanwhile, Western societies, especially Europe, remain the epitome of secularization, a set of non-institutional expressions of religiosities and spiritualities with diffuse frontiers of the *post-axial* type have been generated and expanding, all over the peripheries and even in the North American experience, including such secular components as the nation or person that have been re-sacralized, generating not a few symbolic cleavages [11].

This theory is useful to understand current changes of religions in the world, and it is an invitation to delve into the consequences of his analysis for the theory of secularization [12]. The logical consequence of the theory of multiple modernities applied to religion is that there are and will be diverse processes of 'multiple secularizations' [13]. Indeed secularization must be understood as a complex process and not a lineal one that will be followed by all societies experiencing the modernizing processes. Globalization leaves footprints and affects in its own religious evolution [14].

The approach of Eisenstadt is multidimensional and wide-ranging. It puts the emphasis on institutional and ideological dimensions of historical processes worldwide. The critics

received are because it does not take into account economic aspects. Additionally, it has been considered conceptually flawed and empirically unfounded [15]. It is based on the center-periphery theory, but does not delve into the colonial and neocolonial conflict that it implies. It does not give relevance to the unequal distribution of power in sociocultural phenomena, not considering either conflicting interests and ideologies in contemporary societies.

Some dynamics of current globalization are neglected in Eisenstadt's approach [16]. Globalization during the last century has given enough examples of growing inequalities that accentuate social conflicts [17, 18]. In fact, the uneven development of capitalism with its dialectics of north/south and center/periphery, together with the hegemonic globalization, raises the resistance of local or 'glocal' identities [19, 20]. All these dynamics affect religious evolution and its expressions in different geo-cultural areas of the contemporary world.

Whether born out of poverty, the precariousness of life (unemployment, instability, economic crisis, debts, risks for the future, etc.), violence, social discrimination or new marginalization, new religious movements are leading to traditional religious fervor, traditional or new popular religiosities, and new fundamentalist movements. Either the processes of forced, authoritarian, modernization generate uprisings of nonconformity, or the cultural modernizations affect traditions and customs and generate discontent, claiming cultural identity [18] and generate political motives for mobilizations everywhere. Within these identity claims the religious factor can be relevant. It is not surprising that messianic, clerical, new apocalyptic, or new esoteric movements support and are interwoven with anti-globalization movements or discontents. Trying to protect their dignity people pray to God or supernatural beings that can help them to survive and develop.

The search for meaning is present in popular religions as the result of the cry of the subaltern classes burned by the unequal system and by the institutional and political crisis. Overcoming alienation of consumer society, violence or injustice, triggers new ways of constructing the sense of life and cosmos. The millenarian or apocalyptic tendencies of old or new religious movements have its roots in this type of rationale.

Although multiple modernities give us a conceptual key for understanding what is happening in these religious changes in Latin America there must be at least two other remarks. The first one is that the world religions are answering each one by their own path to multiple interactions with modernities. The example of the answers given by Catholicism in one side, and Islamism in the other, is clear. So, the thesis that they all tend to respond in similar ways to the challenge of multiple modernities [3] must be left aside. The second complementary remark is that in each civilizational area the processes of religious transformations are very different. Secularization tendencies can be present in diverse scenarios although there are diverse religious responses. We observe different types of religious genuine transformations. 'This transformation little by little acquires its own characteristics as a function of historical dynamics, structural conditioning and traditions, evolutions and constructions proper' [21] to the cultures and peoples of Latin America, Asia, Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Religions are being transformed in northern developed countries (for example, Northern Western Europe) with the diminishing importance of public and personal religious practices. In southern countries and

in developing countries (as in Latin America, Africa, Asia), however, religions are being revitalized according to their specific sociohistorical conditions within their cultural peculiarities.

3. Religions: statistics and evolution in the world today

What now seems indisputable is that the old paradigm of secularization has been surpassed. The debate now focuses on whether it should be replaced by the theory of post-secularization or by that of neo-secularization [22]. What is decisive is that recent data and estimates from surveys and centers of research are indicating that the great world religions are not disappearing, and instead religions in general, except Buddhists and other religions, are tending to increase the number of members they draw [23] (**Table 1**).

By 2060, [24] Christians are expected to reach 31.8% of the global population; Muslims 31.3%, Hindus 14.5, Buddhists 4.8 and Folk Religions 4.6. Unaffiliated population is supposed to reach only 12.5% while today it represents 16%.

We must acknowledge that religious affiliation is a dynamic phenomenon. Religious switching plays a role in religions growth and the changing sizes of religious groups. Those people born in the context of one religion might abandon his/her mother's faith. Changes can go in different and even contrary directions. For example, PEW estimates for the period 2015–2020 [25] show that about 5 million people globally are expected to become Christians in this five-year period. At the same time around 13 million are expected to leave Christianity, probably to join the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated.

	Projected population	% of world population	Projected population	% of world population	Population growth
	2015	2015	2060	2060	2015–2060
Christians	2,276,250,000	31.2	3,054,460,000	31.8	778,210,000
Muslims	1,752,620,000	24.1	2,987,390,000	31.1	1,234,770,000
Unaffiliated	1,165,020,000	16.0	1,202,300,000	12.5	37,280,000
Hindus	1,099,110,000	15.1	1,392,900,000	14.5	293,790,000
Buddhists	499,380,000	6.9	461,980,000	4.8	–37,400,000
Folk religions	418,280,000	5.7	440,950,000	4.6	22,670,000
Other religions	59,710,000	0.8	59,410,000	0.6	–29,000
Jews	14,270,000	0.2	16,370,000	0.2	2,100,000
World	7,284,640,000	100.0	9,615,762,060	100.0	2,331,130,000

Source: Pew Research Center [24].

Table 1. Size and projected growth of major religious groups (2015–2060).

Age and fertility are other major factors behind religious changes. Contrasting the great fertility rate of Muslim populations (that evidence a clear growth tendency for this religion), people who do not identify with any religion are probably reducing its relative size worldwide due to the dearth of newborns among the unaffiliated population (that lives mostly in developed central countries).

Some religions are expected to increase their number of members over the next decades, including Islam, which will represent 30% of the world population by 2050 [25]; 31.1% by 2060 [24]. Islam is strong and widespread in Arab countries, non-Arab countries such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and in many South Asian and Southeast Asian countries (Muslims are a strong majority in Indonesia and Malaysia, for example).

Christianity will increase its numbers in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2050 and worldwide; independent churches of various denominations and forms of Pentecostalism will have increased, mainly in Latin America, Africa and the East (Asia and Oceania). The influence of Christianity on the lives of individuals is increasing in many places, and it remains strong in the USA but is expected to have decreased in relative terms in North America by 2050.

Hinduism will prevail in India and Nepal, and as a strong minority in many other Asian nations. Buddhism, Judaism, folk and ethnic religions, Shinto, Confucianism, and many other religions that are widespread in specific contexts are to grow slightly or to decline slightly.

In all the estimates that are made those without religious affiliation seem destined to decline by 2050 (from 16% in 2010 to 13% by the middle of the century, to 12.5% by 2060). It is expected that the so-called 'none's' (atheists, agnostics, those indifferent and others) will suffer the impact of this wave of religious growth.

The important conclusion of the Center for the Study of Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Global Theological Seminar of South Hamilton (Massachusetts) in the United States is that by 2030 the religious affiliation of the population will be higher than in 1970: the figures are 80.8% in that year and 90.2% in 2030. Religions 'do not tend to disappear, as some authors used to predict beginning from the 1960s [23].

Although it is very important to assess religious changes, these religious statistics and socio-religious demography lack precision and understanding of real religious changes that are taking place deep in the mentality of the masses and under the surface of the figures. Indeed we know that statistical invisibility can become the basis of religious discrimination [26].

Great dynamics of religious shifts are left aside or underestimated by the figures. On the one side, there is: (a) the loss of the influence of religions, mainly Christianity, in economic affairs, political and legal issues, and even personal morality in many industrialized countries in the West; (b) the diminishing power of institutionalized religions (churches) over society in general and even their own faithful in many Western-oriented countries. On the other side, in a counter movement, there is the increasing phenomenon of: (a) believers without religious affiliation in many regions of the world; (b) the double affiliation of people in many diverse religious contexts; (c) the revitalization of many types of popular religions (traditional and new), especially in non-Western countries and regions; (d) the global religious resurgence aimed at recovering a religious foundation for the organization of society in the face of a modernization process that has

failed (especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the Islamic civilization that now intends to 'Islamize modernity'); and (e) the changing patterns of religious systems—including religious reforms and revitalizations—in different regions of the non-Western world (the Islamic world and Latin America, each with its imprints and idiosyncrasies, being good contrasting examples).

These facts make us realize that in reality what happens is that the specific religious evolutions depend much on the regional (or continental) history, culture and religious dynamics. Depending on the type of analysis employed, one can identify at least nine great religious/civilizational or geo-cultural areas in the world today: Western Europe; Eurasia (Central-Eastern-Europe and North-Center Asia); North America; Latin America and the Caribbean; Middle East-Arabia; Indo-Asia; South-East and East Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Oceania. The hypothesis that these geo-cultural-religious areas of the world correspond to different processes of modernizations can be sustained—*mutatis mutandis*—in historical, cultural and statistical terms.¹ We can presume that in each religious/civilizational area we will find specific religious field dynamics driven by the main world religious traditions historically spread through the region for centuries and the peculiar arrangements between religions and society in each case through the modernization processes from the eighteenth century onwards, including colonization and neo-colonization processes and the attempts toward decolonization in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

4. Popular religions of the world today

Social sciences have recognized the historical trend—in many cultural areas and world religions—in the formation of a widespread 'popular religion' related and subordinated to an 'official religion'. Under, and in a dialectical tension with, the official religion a popular religion with its own manifestations is developed [29]. Official and popular religions interact in a complex way: they share a lot of things, they are mutually attracted and repelled; they intersect and differ and take distances, and they are constantly providing feedback to each other, although in a permanently asymmetric relationship.

Here 'popular' does not mean fashionable or in vogue, nor massive or related to media culture, as the expression in English is usually used. Popular designates the expressions of ordinary people's faith and the search for relationships with the divine (or the supernatural) in an individual or communitarian way—in a more direct and effective way—in their everyday lives. They are religious expressions often found in less privileged classes and groups. The body and iconic expressions take an outstanding role in this less intellectual and dogmatic type of religiosity. New forms of religiosity, mostly spiritualities that democratize mysticism, are spreading all over the world [30].

¹Considering the World Value Survey database [27], Smith and Vaidyanathan [12] and Huntington [28]. The latter author's hypothesis about the 'clash of civilizations' takes into account that we are not moving toward a unified world: language and religion worldwide is diversifying. The author suggests that this diversification among civilizations is a threat to peace and calls for a revitalization of the West. As he affirms: 'Modernization, instead, strengthens those cultures and reduces the relative power of the West. In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western' ([28], p. 78).

Popular religion can be understood as a set of local and massive religious expressions where simple lay people practice their heterodox rituals and beliefs related to a universal religious system. In all the world religions we find historical expressions of popular religion, although with many serious differences.

Generally speaking, the singular concept of popular religion is used. In conceptual terms it is an ideal type, though the historical and empirical phenomenon of the multiple and multitudinous forms of religiosities and varied expressions must be acknowledged. This is why we speak here in plural terms of popular religions.

As it can be demonstrated we can find diverse expressions of popular religion in the different forms of Christianity, Judaism, and with other traits than found in Western cultures, in Islam, and in Eastern cultures, Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism and other Asian religions.

Beyond the religious multicolored landscape printed by local and ancient traditions, the popular religions of Latin America, Africa and Asia seem to share common features: attachment to life, perception of evil, dynamisms and symbolisms, the presence of the extraordinary (e.g. miracles), and their distance, more or less accentuated, from Western thought and rationality.

In each case the features of popular religion will depend on the specificities of the historical-cultural area traditions; the cultures and local religious traditions; the institutional development of the religious macro-field; the evolution of local social structures and power; and the types of cross-cutting interethnic or intercultural encounters to which they have been subjected historically.

5. Latin America and popular religions

Latin America—a peripheral continent in world context—in religious terms is increasingly plural. The religious field that was some decades ago totally Catholic has changed radically. Catholics percentage has diminished, and Evangelicals have grown considerably in recent years. The classical interaction between religion and society, and between religion and politics in this continent has been replaced by new forms of religions in the public sphere. The revitalization of religions—especially in terms of Pentecostals and charismatics; ethnic and indigenous religions; believers not affiliated, etc.—in public and private spaces reveals the changes that have taken place in Latin America's cultural evolution since the nineteenth century [31–33]. We observe in this context popular religions that are revitalized where millions of Latin American devotees go on pilgrimage each year to ask favors of their saints and the Virgin Mary and crowds take part in Pentecostal rituals.

The renewed religious landscape can serve us as a paradigm in comparative terms. The processes of secularization in developed central countries—especially in Western Europe—have privatized beliefs and practices, specialized functions and reduced church influence. In contrast, Churches have now less influence than before and in all Latin American countries church and state have been separated for a long period, and religion continues to be a relevant

part of the cultural landscape. In Latin America the privileged, educated (high or upper middle class) social groups have been secularized, but the vast majority of the middle and lower classes are adepts of rituals and popular cults, Catholics, Evangelicals or Pentecostals, including in some countries indigenous and/or African-Americans cults. The macro-religious field has been pluralized and diversified across various sociocultural Latino contexts, in line with the globalization of communications and knowledge, and the modernization processes undertaken in the region.

There have been many studies on popular religion in Latin America [32, 34, 35]. It is perhaps one of the main characteristic features (certainly not the only one) of Latin American culture and it defines, in a specific way, its cultural identity in the context of multiple modernities and the new landscape of religious diversity [36].

According to recent data on Latin America, nearly 50% of the population say in their religious services that speaking in tongues, praying for a miraculous healing and prophesying are common practices. The percentages are 86% for Protestants and 49% for Catholics. This type of religious expressions is linked to what has been called charismatics. In 15 countries (out of 18) Protestants practice it by more than 80%. In 12 countries (out of 18) Catholics practice charismatics by more than 50%.

We must add to this type of ritual a great population that takes part in popular religion rituals. Sometimes popular religion and charismatics overlap, nonetheless there are also disjoint sets of popular religion in its own and pure charismatic expressions. There is no doubt that popular Catholicism continues to be one of the main expressions of religious belief in the continent. There are numerous shrines to the Virgin Mary throughout Latin America, from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. Each year millions of pilgrims, from four million pilgrims for the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico to half a million pilgrims for the Virgin of Tirana in northern Chile, visit these. These are devotional expressions of colonial origin maintained in the midst of modernity. The Virgin of Copacabana, of colonial Andean origin (1583), on Lake Titicaca, remains vital as one of the most important devotional sites in Bolivia. Others may be mentioned: Caacupe (Paraguay), Caridad del Cobre (Cuba), Aparecida (Brazil), Lujan (Argentina), Chiquinquirá (Colombia), Coromoto (Venezuela), Alta Gracia (Dominican Republic), Del Rosario (Guatemala), Santa María de la Antigua (Panama), etc.

Together with charismatics (either Pentecostal or Catholic), there are a great number of devotees of popular rituals. These expressions flourish in the Latino culture with its carnivals, football fans and the mood of festivities, with their counterpart in sorrow, suffering and violence [37]. Many of the everyday lives and cultural manifestations of the Latin American people are then guided by a symbolic logic of action, an 'other logic' [32] that has been denied by the Latin American elites with their Western-oriented codes.

One dimension of popular religion is that it helps to shape identities to different groups whose position in society is negatively privileged [38]. Popular religion often accompanies forms of cultural resistance of non-Western peoples to the modernization that damages their traditions. The popular religion then contributes to resisting the various forms of exploitative and enslaving capitalism, restoring dignity and hope to ordinary people.

The critical review of current manifestations of religious Latin American pluralism, the loss of influence of institutional expressions (churches) and the increasing development of charismatic manifestations and different spiritualities, the growing presence of popular and 'lived religion' not only have to do with the crisis of many churches and the disaffection toward institutions, also with the influence of new symbolic languages, rituals and body-oriented practices whose vector has been the modernization process itself. What Latin American popular religions are showing in many aspects raises questions and suggests new ways of interpreting religious phenomena in the globalized world.

The features of Catholicism in the popular Christian Latin area (Latin America and South-Western Europe) engender typical traits very different from those Christian traditions found in the Protestant (Northern Europe) or Orthodox (Eastern Europe and Russia) areas of the world. Popular Catholicism is an example of the dialectic between global and local and specific modernities interwoven in peculiar forms: Latin American's popular Catholicism has some roots in common with Latin/European popular Catholicism (Spain, Portugal, Italy), but differs in relevant points; within the Latin American region the Meso-American indigenous, syncretic Catholicism (Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras) has distinctive features we do not find in the Andean Region of South America (Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and the north of Chile). This indigenous Andean Catholicism has its own specific symbols and identities. Popular Christianity in the areas colonized by English-speaking and Protestant cultures (areas of the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa) share some features in common with its mixture of tribal rituals and Christian beliefs, but differ greatly from Afro-American Catholicism or Afro-American Cults (with syncretic Christian beliefs) as in Umbanda, Candomblé and Santería. Catholic popular expressions of Asian countries (the south of India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines) share varied elements with Latin American Catholicism, although they also have their own traits because of long-term backgrounds and ancient traditions [39].

6. Religion in industrialized western countries

In industrialized central countries—especially in Western Europe—the liberal culture has introduced new values and icons and traditional religion is reserved for the few. A growing number of people do not profess the orthodox beliefs and do not participate in church activities and organizations. The traces of Christian influence—in a civilization marked by Western Christianity—are still there but they do not have the significance that they did in the past. Churches are losing their former influence and power and new suppliers are, as a result, offering religious or spiritual alternatives and replacements.

Apparently the percentage of atheists and agnostics is growing, however it does not seem to be the real trend. The share of the unaffiliated population residing in Europe is projected to grow from 12% in 2010 only to 13% in 2050 [25]. However, many of the religiously unaffiliated do hold some religious or spiritual beliefs [40]. Following the Pew data, it can be estimated that between a third to two-thirds of the unaffiliated population in Western countries believes in God or a higher power.

A growing number of people do not see themselves as church members, but are in search of religious or spiritual meaning: they are 'believers without belonging' [41]. In everyday life, religion continues to be important, perhaps with different meanings and significance. 'In tragedy and disaster, religion is still a major source of symbols, sentiments and ceremonies' [42].

The theoretical model of the religious market has been used to understand this type of religious experiences of people in a secularized milieu. The rational choice will induce consumers to pick and mix religious items to match their commitment and interest at the modern supermarket of faith [41]. There is not the space to discuss or debate this approach, but we only can advance the idea that consumers of religion are not in fact consumers as we currently understand the term: each individual is an active agent of religious production, although framed by the official religious codes and cultural regulations of his or her time and society.

New forms of religious or spiritual beliefs and practices are flourishing in the high-tech society. Interest in spiritualities by 'non-religious' or, better, non-practicing believers [30], appears to be growing. Astrology, yoga or other esoteric expressions, New Age or adapted Eastern spiritualities (westernized Buddhism or Taoism or similar), native or Afro-American or neo-pagan religions are growing movements, networks or even individualistic cults that tend to be present within well-trained, well-educated populations working with or handling high technologies and seeking self-knowledge, body care, human development, a better quality of life and harmony with nature and the cosmos.

All these unchurched forms of religions—flourishing also in North America and in Western Europe—and in the Western-oriented elites of developing countries of the Global South—have to be studied in greater detail as forms of 'new popular religions'. They cover a vast range: from metaphysical religions, alternative medicines, psychological spiritualities [43], transhumanist cults to auto-secularized Christianity [44].

We have studied for a long while what has been called the 'believer without religion' or the 'believer my own way' in Latin American contexts. Although similar in appearance they cannot be assimilated to Sheilism [45]—a name for religious 'do-it-yourselfism'—in industrialized countries. The contextual ethos and culture in each case are different and induce diverse types of 'lived religions' [46]. The believer 'my own way' in Latin American countries is usually inspired by the distinctive mode of 'Latino' spirituality, participating without problem in popular cults—which is not an intimate and individualistic way of religiosity. This is also a powerful reason why these type of new popular religions expression must be studied under the multiple modernities paradigm.

7. Popular religions in eastern Asia and Islamic milieu

Popular religions in East-Asian countries must be the object of more attention. Since statistics show very high percentages of non-affiliates in countries like China and Japan. China alone is the home to 62% of the world religiously unaffiliated people [40]. The hypothesis that can be advanced is that we are facing forms of believers without explicit religious affiliation, hidden

from the surface of the numbers. Many of these forms of 'religiousness' can mask 'popular religionists' who are invisible to statistics. The other fact is that in Eastern Asia many traditional practices are indeed not called "religions".

The particular interaction of religious traditions with political power—in its changing historical phases in this cultural area—may also explain the emergence of the 'unaffiliated' category, which is actually a form of expression of the parallelism that runs between the official and canonical religious expressions (used to interact with power and the state) and the various forms of popular and folk religions that survive—maybe hidden—in the daily lives of ordinary people.

Popular religion in China has been usually studied under Weberian optics, the popular cults of the masses included multiple gods and sorcerers, with magic having a predominant role [47]. Perhaps one of the main misconceptions comes because the Western concept of religion does not fully apply to the main Chinese traditions, some of them considered philosophies and not religions in China [48].

In modern China, the religious landscape can be studied beginning with the three canonical religious systems: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism [49]. Because these teachings often interact with each other the most important 'lived religion' freely integrates what it calls the 'three teachings', producing many and diverse manifestations of popular and syncretic religions with its widespread devotion to the ancestors, pilgrimages, shrines and its multiple mediums and shamans [50]. The revitalization of these Chinese popular religions brings about a debate about its relations with Christianity, the politics of the People's Republic and modernization [51].

A similar dynamic—although with different traits—is often found in Japan, Thailand, India and many other Eastern Asian countries. Eclectic and syncretic religious expressions are found not only in Asian contexts as those promoted by prominent Buddhists in Sri Lanka [52] but also in the Muslim world. Zar possession and exorcism cult—probably from Ethiopian origin—has spread in North Africa and The Middle East [3] becoming popular in the contemporary urban culture of Cairo and other major cities of the Islamic world. A women-only cult, its gatherings involve food and musical performances, culminating in ecstatic dancing, lasting several nights. These subaltern religious experiences within or alongside Islam evidence that modernization, urbanization and migration have opened ways for new popular religious forms, which can be considered an alternative to the official and elite religious and cultural discourse.

The dialectics official and popular religion can also be found in South Asian contexts where kings and clerics often built devotional centers alongside pre-existing indigenous cults. As Hefner [3] says "This cosmological accommodation resembles the relationship between non-Christian cults and saint veneration in European and Latin American Catholicism" (...) Although Protestantism and reformed Catholicism fought these degraded and heretic forms of popular and syncretic Christianity, in South and Southeast Asia pre-Hindu or non-Hindu cults have survived and even revitalized together with the official great traditions, even after elements of them were drawn up into Hindu superstructure.

In Islamic contexts, the relationship between religions and modernity is quite specific. Gellner [53] sketches a quite plausible picture of the relationship between official Islamic religion ('high Islam') and popular Islamic religion. The existence of a variety of movements and religious groups within civil society in Muslim countries is part of its multiple modernities and has not been sufficiently recognized in the West [16, 54, 55].

The official religion tends toward puritanism and is in the forefront of reforms. Popular Islam with its magical beliefs in saints, pilgrimages and shrines, rituals and festivities departs from the elites (and therefore takes distance from reformism and of modernity). This type of religiosity has always provided the masses for the leadership of reformers and even in cases for the radical *ihadists*. Since this popular religion has been more likely to externalize its rituals, it has sometimes been questioned for having Sufi influences, with its mystical rituals, chants and dervish dances.

The accommodation of high Islam with the requirements of modernity is clear and makes modernization fully compatible with the reform of Islam, combining in one movement reformism and nationalism. Thus religious traditions in history gradually assumed an important role in defining 'authentic' Muslim modernities [56].

Perhaps the crises caused by the invasions of Afghanistan (in the 1980s by the USSR and then subsequently by the USA), the Gulf War and the Iraq War, and then by the chaotic aftermath of the Arab Spring (2010 on) have revitalized popular religious movements in Arab and Muslim countries—reinvigorating local warlords and tribalism, and with them local Islamic practices.

The contradictions of the modernization process and the search for autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Western colonial or postcolonial powers has accentuated an entire range of Muslim responses, from politics to clothes to architecture. 'In Muslim society postmodernism means a shift to ethnic or Islamic identity (not necessarily the same thing and at times opposed to each other) as against an imported foreign or Western one; a rejection of modernity (...and...) above all, a numbing awareness of the power and pervasive nature of the Western media which are perceived as hostile' ([57], p. 32).

The changes and turmoil brought by the recent neocolonial interventions, the Arab Spring and the Middle East civil wars (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen) are creating new conditions for religious changes and conflicts between factions (Sunni vs. Shiite) and giving more space for movements to polarize (fundamentalists vs. liberal and moderates), and creating new conditions for revitalizing Popular Islam.

8. Toward a new sociological approach

Glocalization—as a complex and dynamic process—often revitalize local and popular traditions under forms that share common trends and in the same dialectical movement it gives rises to different and specific expressions and reshapes the religious fields. Religions do not simply react against modernization instead they originate diverse responses to the modern world. All these religious changes are taking place in a world of nation-states, mass

urbanization, economic specialization, mass and new technological communications and migrations that render social borders permeable to transcultural flows. Sociological theory is in a continuous effort to be able to improve understanding of these dynamics and current transformations.

In recent years, we have many signs that the sociology of religion is regaining the prestige that should never have lost. In part this is due to the emergence of the religious phenomenon under study. But partly it is because what Jim Beckford requested in his *Religion and Advanced Industrial Societies* [58] is being fulfilled, although gradually [59]. Beckford requested that sociologists of religion come out of their isolation and begin to debate with sociology in full, and also requested that theoretical and general sociology take into account religions because it 'challenges many taken-for-granted assumptions about their models of modernity' ([58], p. xi).

The scientific approach to religious phenomena is to be assessed within the framework of scientific production as an international system. If we look at the intellectual production of the sciences, and social sciences in particular, we will see that there is still social asymmetry in the international division of scientific labor. Theories, major issues and even controversies are generated in the North; the intellectual production of the Global South follows them, producing abundant empirical or historical analysis, but usually generating scarce original theory.

A well-known tradition of postcolonial studies has emphasized the process by which the West has 'invented' a certain image of the Orient—functional to its interests. This type of image allows you to define what the 'other' is, nevertheless in terms totally unrelated to what the other defines as himself. Said [60] stresses that 'East' and 'West' operate as opposites, building the concept of the 'East' as a negative inversion of Western culture.

The production of the social sciences reveals still a postcolonial trend, in fact. The main authors in the industrialized countries—English-Speaking or Western European continentals—tend to ignore the production of the intellectuals of the Global South (Asia, Latin America, and Africa) while the latter still—although with less emphasis than was previously the case—consider intellectual production in the North as their guide and inspiration. This also happens in the field of sociology of religion, of course with honorable exceptions.²

A remarkable author that supports the thesis of multiple modernities is the British researcher Grace Davie. In an outstanding analysis of religion in contemporary sociology, *Sociology of Religion* [41] she makes a record of studies of religion—first of Britain, then of Europe, then globally. She underlines the exceptionalism of religion in Europe with its specific process of secularization [63], which cannot be generalized to other continents. But like many sociologists producing science in the North—very used to reading their own English-speaking or European colleagues, trapped in their Eurocentrism—when it comes to analyzing religious realities of Latin America she does not quote any native author—who have done valuable work, some translated into English—she makes only references to American or English authors on Latin America.

²Some examples are Beckford and Demerath III [61] and Cipriani [62].

The difficulties for analyzing the phenomena of different modernities not only derive from the division of intellectual labor but also from the categories and the analytical framework from which we start.

Kepel [64] in his study of the so-called fundamentalist movements from the three monotheist religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, affirmed that each religious culture is developing specific 'truths' that are giving rise to strong identity claims. Their discourses and practices are meaningful and not 'the product of deregulation of reason' ([64], p. 26). The point is that there are still no appropriate concepts for some religious movements. The notions used to understand Muslim events come from Paris or New York. 'Integrism' as a concept was born in Catholic milieus; 'fundamentalism' as a concept was born in Protestant milieus. They have only metaphorical, not universal, value. The author explains that these terms are 'biased' and simplify reality. They are adopted for convenience, given the current Western inability to interpret Islamic movements. Yet they hinder knowledge and blur the perception of these phenomena as a whole ([64], pp. 15–16).

Many Latin American sociologists have tried and are trying to advance toward the decolonization of sociological knowledge [65–67] and of the sociology of religion in particular [68, 32]. No better understanding of the local and 'glocal' realities can be obtained—in a comprehensive perspective—than when local people are involved in knowledge production. Foreign observers need to enhance objectivity—epistemic intersubjectivity—but local knowledge is better fitted to establishing connotations and decoding meanings.

As the Asian sociologist Syed Farid Alatas [69] has suggested, attention to local intellectuals such as the ones he examines, José Rizal (1861–1896) from the Philippines and Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), an Arab from the north of Africa, can open up an alternative research agenda other than the Western-oriented one. It reverses the subject–object dichotomy in which the knowledge in social thought and social theory are generally derived from Western European and North American white males, and replaces the domination of European-derived categories and concepts with a multicultural coexistence. Spikard has been making inroads in this direction with forays into the possibility of a Confucian sociology of religion [70] and an Islamic sociology of the same [71].

There are multiple religious transformations in the world today. They are a challenge to the analytical and theoretical frameworks of mainstream sociology. The evolution of sociology—especially the sociology of religion—is marked by the 'fathers' (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Troeltsch, Mauss, Simmel, James) all of them writing in Western contexts [72]. So, it is not strange that many of the sociological controversies about religion have been around the Western pattern of an 'evolutionary' framework: modern societies will be secularized, so modernization processes will be brought—among other variables—by secularization. These theoretical statements were displaced by the criticism of secularization theories from the mid-1970s onwards. But the implicit framework is still there.

The fact that this premise has been taken as normative in the theories of modernization and then the theories of development has had huge implications for sociological theory in general and for sociology of religion theories in particular. Thus Western-oriented approach has

gone hand in hand with Christian-oriented and even Christian church-oriented approaches [72] and they have polluted current approaches to the cultural and religious phenomenon worldwide.

As stated some years ago [72], there is an agenda for the ‘de-Westernization’ of sociology and the need to determine new analytical categories. Changes that have taken place in recent decades in globalization with its multiple modernities’ outcomes have transformed religious fields as previously understood by sociological theory. ‘This calls for a revision of concepts. For the “de-Westernization” of global religious reality forces us to rethink once again those sociological categories that are grounded in the experience, tradition and structure of Western religion’ ([72], p. 71).

In this new multidisciplinary and intercultural effort, new ideas coming from the South are welcomed. And the South must be seen more as an epistemic and intellectual way of seeing things than a geographical or geopolitical place. The South here means a different and alternative view to the hegemonic Western, colonialist, white, male view of reality.

9. Concluding remarks

Contrary to the classical theses of secularization, the contemporary world is not witnessing the inevitable decline of religions. Religions are being transformed. As we have seen, this is evident in the various expressions of popular religions in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. The case of the “secularized” societies of the West is specific in its own and cannot be taken as a model, neither empirical nor theoretical and less in evolutionary terms.

As we have said, the theory of multiple modernities permits us to understand why homogeneous and hegemonic modernization models—Eurocentric—are in crisis. Davie [63] herself talks about the uniqueness of the European case in terms of its own religious and secularization processes, which cannot be generalized. Otherwise as there is a European case—which has served for a long time as an exemplary model, although erroneously—there are also the Asian, the Arab, the Latin American, the African and the North American ‘religious transformation’ cases.

Each one has its particular historical, cultural, sociopolitical and religious traditions and present processes. Certainly there are some common traits within a global process of religious transformations, but what is dominant is the crystallizing of different religious modernities within broad cultural/civilizational patterns—whether near to or far away from Western European civilization and Western Christianity.

The cross-cuttings between the dynamics of modernization processes and local/regional traditions and histories are producing many more transformations than we imagined, both in the cultural and the religious sphere. A *long durée* perspective, as suggested by Braudel [73], combining sociology and history must be put in place. Intercultural processes have increased in these multiple contexts (and so social conflicts [74]). The interweaving of old and new religious traditions is accentuating interculturality and is generating great conditions for the

emergence of new types of syncretism [75] and/or sociocultural and even material (and violent) conflicts. The consequence is the development of not one pattern of religious evolution and change, but multiple cultural, institutional and religious patterns within societies that have a specific and distinctively form of modernity of their own [8].

Modernizing theories posited the process of secularization as a positive path toward progress. In its radical perception, the rationalization of life—assisted by the scientific-technological society—will make religions fade and eventually disappear. These theories assumed that religion would inevitably diminish in terms of its role and influence in modern society. Meanwhile theories of postmodernism preached the crisis of modern reason and the multiplication of narratives that would end with the mega-narratives of the past. Therefore, along with the progressive dissolution of the subject, all religious legitimization would tend to fade.

Thus, these common sense ideas (and even classical frameworks of some sociology) applied to religious phenomena are not well fitted to understanding at least two great current religious dynamics of the world today: (a) the increasingly different paths that we can find in religious diversifications and the multiplication of popular religion and spiritual expressions within multiple modernities; (b) the increasing importance of emotions and bodily dimensions within religious symbols, icons and practices of the masses in the different geo-cultural areas—and religious fields—of the world today.

A full understanding of religious pluralism and of the multiple religious types of transformations—including new religious movements, new forms of the world's religious traditions and multiple popular religions worldwide, not only in the West and in the North—must be an *intercultural* [76, 77] effort that requires new epistemic fundamentals.

Many sociologists have advanced or proposed the theory of rational choice to analyze the growing religious pluralism and the various forms of individualized religions. Following my arguments, the rational choice paradigm has to be considered a flawed perspective because religion has to be understood as a unidimensional, rationalistic and monocultural reality. It certainly is more applicable to Western Christianity, as Sharot [78] has shown, and much less relevant and pertinent for analyzing Eastern religions and magic/popular religions because they are not built on rationalized ways of living, as in the case for Western Christianity. The rationality of their social actions follows another logic [32] that the rational choice theory does not address, and further it is based on the congregational-based Christian religion of the West—as we have said—and not on popular or ethnic religions, which Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and other Eastern, African or folk Latino-American religions have as their base. Religions and spiritual experiences in the multiple modernities paradigm must be assessed in a cross-cultural and from an intercultural perspective.

Theories of religion that attempt to build up a body of transcultural, universalistic generalizations, beginning with basic axioms of human one-dimensional rationality, will fail. A new sociological approach means making a great epistemological effort to overcome the problems of the analytical focus based on one type of rationality, mainly the Western-oriented type of rational action. Religious and spiritual pluralism in the globalized world, with its diverse and multiple manifestations, is challenging that effort.

Author details

Cristian Parker

Address all correspondence to: cristian.parker@usach.cl

Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Santiago de Chile, Santiago de Chile, Chile

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