

IOANA REPCIUC

DYNAMICS OF RELIGION IN A BROADER EUROPE

Ioana Repciuc

“A. Philippide” Institute of Romanian Philology, Department of Ethnography and Folklore, Romanian Academy, Iași, Romania.

Email: repciuc_i_o@yahoo.com

Review of Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012).

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The topic of the social significance of religion was primarily introduced by Durkheim and his sociological school and it continues to be under scrutiny in recent years even in political debates, and not just in specialized scholarly environments, especially due to the controversy on the inclusion of a reference to an European religious legacy in the European Constitution and in the Treaty of Lisbon.¹ Basically, it has been said that precisely the widening of EU made more difficult the task of reaching a certain degree of homogeneity or resemblance of European values, ideas, and expectations and therefore it is harder to find an institutional agreement especially on cultural and religious grounds. These discussions revealed the importance of religion within social and political spheres, and therefore sociological insights like this one ought to offer a better and clearer perspective on the issue. The acceptance of Europe's diversity and the institutional stress on cultural specificities are strongly pointed out by the opponents of an "ever close union" of the European nations. The impossibility of a real European "community" in its extended sense was argued in terms of religious discrepancies, as Anthony Smith emphasized: "When it comes to the ritual and ceremony of collective identification, there is no European equivalent of national or religious community"².

The European territory on which the analyses are centered leads us to expect that the editors of the book hope to offer here not a general theory of secularization, but a particular one, formulating a conclusion on the social significance of religion in what they have called "the enlarged Europe". Eventually, what this "enlarged Europe" means precisely is briefly revealed in the summary of this book, from where we can learn the nine European countries being explored. We might notice that Pollack and his colleagues choose to approach geographical corners or shores of Europe, from Portugal in the south to Estonia and Finland, in the north, from Ireland in the west to Russia in the east. One inadequacy of secularization theory (frequently pointed out by its adversaries) is that it supposed to be correctly applied on a general level, both geographically and culturally. The proponents of secularization tended to see this process as an inevitable phenomenon in all modern societies, starting in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and continuing further nowadays.

The title of this book sounds general enough to make the specialized reader understand that the main purpose of such an editorial project has to be an in-depth analysis of the secularization theory and a search of what could still be the role of religion in contemporary Europe, all these envisaged in a sociological perspective.

One long and extensive debate in the recent sociology of religion debates is developed around two opposite sides, one which pretends religiosity lost its value in contemporary people's lives and communities and became just a private issue, and the other one supports the idea that religion still has a social significance, though quite diminished and altered

from what it was. The contemporary field of religious sociological studies still perpetuates the clash between the influential theory of a continual secularization, promulgated in the 1960s, and its total rejection some years after, so it becomes difficult nowadays to make reliable statements on religion's evolution and even less cautious to try predictions of the future.

Likewise, the title asks a question and also gives as possible answers the three main thesis of what happens with religion in Europe. To adequately search the viability of these processes, the editors, three German sociologists, working at the universities of Münster and Leipzig, offer here, grouped under similar methodology and questions, nine independent national case studies (of Finland, Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Poland, Russia, Estonia, Hungary, and Croatia) authored by local experts. "Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization" are not the subsequent conclusion of the project, but are used as starting points, whose adequacy needs to be proven for each country.

Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, and Gert Pickel also provide a coherent conceptual framework in the introductory chapter, which proves to be related and supported by the results of a complex sociological survey established and conducted by them in 2006: "Church and Religion in the Enlarged Europe: Analyses of the Social Significance of Religion in East and West". In order to set a solid theoretical basis, the editors question precisely the recent widely accepted assumption of the secularization thesis, also emphasizing the critiques it has received. Besides using the important results of their own project, the authors follow the methodological tradition of the contemporary sociology of religion, by basing their research on large sociological surveys, like World Values Surveys, the International Social Surveys Program, and the European Social Survey. When needed, the authors add valuable information from small national ethnographical sources, historical documentation, etc. Therefore the book is somehow one final product (besides another volume published in 2009) of the project conducted in 2006, and its results, demonstrating the efficiency of the empirical data and the rich quantitative accounts on these countries' religiosity, the diversity of religious features.

The intention of the three German sociologists – clearly explained in the foreword, as well as in the last conclusive chapter – is to acquire a unified state of research, despite the extensive cross-cultural landscape and the noticeable differences. In order to expand the territory that informed the mainstream of secularization analysis, which was Western Europe, they give a particular attention to what could be called the margins of the empirical core, by operating a "widening of the field of research to Eastern Europe". These margins imply features which made their religious situation more likely different than that documented for Western democracies. By accepting the secularization theory's main critiques and weaknesses (its unilateral, deterministic and teleological

character), the editors of this volume have already, together or separately, published their moderate perspective with regards to secularization; they accept the inevitability of secularization, but want to find how much this general pattern and its sub-themes could be applicable to an “enlarged Europe”. For example, secularization interposes the complex social and political process of post-communist transition, in some Eastern and Central European countries³. This adaptive, flexible, more empirically grounded progression was theorized by Gert Pickel and named “contextual secularization”⁴, though here the editors prefer the syntagm “a differentiated theory of secularization”, “that allows for secularization at different levels, at different times and at different speeds”⁵.

After most sociologists’ attention was focused on Western Europe, in the recent years the post-socialist countries are beginning to represent the most interesting research field, and “the (new) public role of religion has become a prominent theme in the sociology of religion in the post-communist region”⁶. Hence the commentators focus on the social position of traditional religious structures along with new denominations in the context of the institutional freedom of religion, the interconnection between national and religious identities, the relationship between Church and State or between religion and politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They are increasingly interested in the development of the macro level of religiosity, considering that secularization, in these ex-communist countries, was an ideologically and politically forced process, and not the consequence of a natural social development, as was the case with Western democracies. In addition, the theories which had been explanatory for Western religiosities are not quite the same for Eastern Europe, which “has a background that differs historically, ideologically, and with respect to the theory of secularization”⁷.

One of the main methodological resources of current sociology of secularization is perhaps the one created by Karel Dobbelaere, who argued that secularization should be investigated on different levels of society: *the societal level* – concentrating on functional differentiation of social sub-systems, within which the ecclesiastical institution plays a certain role interfering with other ones, such as the political power; *the meso level* or *organizational level*, or *intra-religious level*, is reflected, for example, by the emergence of a free religious market, but also by the changes in the organizational background of traditional churches; in the end, *the individual or micro level* provides information on individual religiosity, rendering theories as: the privatization, dechurchification, subjective or alternative religiosity, etc.⁸.

Following closely these three levels, the authors of this book are particularly interested in drawing conclusions on the overlap between these perspectives. They understand and emphasize the relevance of the individual or micro level for their theme, struggling to find the social significance of religion according to people’s expectations and needs and

asking if the actual religious institutions are or are not responding to these needs. To achieve this goal, they look at different sociological indicators, from the religious self-identification to church attendance, from private prayer to extra-church religious forms. They also take into account traditional socio-demographic variables (age, sex, level of education) and the way religious socialization and education in the family environment positively influence children's religiosity. They are aware that not all the indicators of religiosity give the same reliable results. For example, the societal level could be more accurately investigated using survey data than the individual level with its private, subjective issues.

On the first level of secularization, the most influential theory in the field was the idea of a functional differentiation of society in modern times, a process named "societalization" by Bryan Wilson or "compartmentalization" by Karel Dobbelaere. Philosophically speaking, this corresponds to the significant change in individual expectations when the idea gradually emerged that seeking God by religious means would not be the greatest and compelling necessity of people's lives. This vision is perhaps the strongest and most lasting legacy of Weber's theory in the sociology of religion. Rationalized religiosity or "ethical purity" of the "ideal-type" of Protestantism is the final phase of this long process. This Weberian idea seems consistent with the authors' interest in searching denominational and cultural-confessional reasons to explain the religious change, mainly when they discuss the distinction between secularization in the Roman Catholic environment and in the Protestant one. Quoting the secularization theoreticians, the editors name this theoretical approach *the supply-side rational-choice approach*, a process continually informed by the evolution of modern science and by a multi-level "demystification of the world".

Nevertheless, not all the features of a rationally chosen religiosity might explain the situation of some of the countries researched here. The standard theory argues that a period of suppression of religion is followed necessarily by revitalization, encouraged by the fact that people have regained their freedom of faith and religious rituals. A short increase of religiosity rates has indeed occurred during the 1990s in many European post-communist countries⁹, but this has rapidly decreased due to independent factors, such as industrialization, social modernization, urbanization, and deruralization. On the other hand, in other post-socialist states, the traditional majoritarian Church did grow in public relevance and even in its political role precisely because it was politically marginalized by atheist propaganda. According to Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, in a country where there exists an oppressed Church serving as a symbol of the people's political resistance, the confessional commitment naturally involves a commitment to nationalist ideas. This amalgamation of religion and national values, with the Church perceived as a "historical

legacy” or a “natural ally of morality”, was named by experts “path dependency of religiosity”¹⁰.

The role of religion in the rise of these nations sometimes becomes a favorite ideological argument in ecclesiastical policy, enabling the State to confer larger social and political prerogatives to the national Church. Probably the mixture of nationalism and major denominational identity of these states could be explained by the assumption that the Eastern nationalism is more authoritarian than the Western one, which had always been considered more liberal and civic¹¹. These issues provide a justification for a still prominent role of Churches on the societal level of the countries studied in this volume. It seems that these Churches – especially the Roman Catholic ones described here, from Poland, Ireland, Portugal, and Croatia – managed to merge their history and identity with those of the nation. In all these cases, the Catholic population visibly agrees with the role that the Church has to play in society, though they do expect a more precise separation between religion and politics. They tend to accept Church’s involvement in less controversial topics, like the intervention and social assistance in hospitals and prisons, but they are hardly at the same level of agreement when it comes to the connection between religion and science or religion and education.

As religiously strong as they seem and though they indeed share a positive connection of high levels of religious membership and patriotic feelings, even the Catholic countries on this list manifest deep changes in recent times. These countries are no longer so denominationally homogenous, and the younger generations are more and more interested in newer, non-traditional forms of religiosity. Local historical processes affect every country without exception, regardless of their confessional specificity. The authors provide us with interesting examples of historical diversity and particular national challenges. For example, the Catholic Church of Poland, by its strong resistance against the communist regime benefited from the strong adherence of its believers after the collapse of the former political system. The end of Portugal’s monarchy in 1910 created the grounds for anti-clerical attitudes and encouraged the separation between State and Church. Although the religious individualization of Ireland started much later than in other Catholic European states, and it is generally accepted that the Catholic Church had a crucial role in establishing the Irish cultural identity, the powerful process of globalization and the economic growth in the last decades threaten to profoundly change its conservative religious landscape. Croatia still has high rates of Catholic membership, but it has been argued that this could be a reaction to the general political insecurity of the Balkan area and its religious conflicts. Another interesting feature of these countries, strongly emphasized by all the authors who investigate them, is that even though believers publicly admit their confessional adherence to

the Church, they do not do the same in practical matters, like actively participating to church services or prescribed rituals.

The power of these national churches is also related to the phenomenon of religious pluralization. Steve Bruce considers this connection as an imported model from the 19th century, i.e. a limited freedom for the minority denominations and an official preference of the population for the religion of the titular nationality¹². So the survival of a majoritarian Church negatively affects an authentic opening of the religious market. Even in denominationally mixed countries within this “enlarged Europe”, religiosity does not increase, as it assumes *the economic-market model*, established by Peter Berger, who argued that religious pluralism raises the level of religious attachment. Supported by empirical data, the editors are stressing that this model is rather controversial to be applied in the European context, though it proved to be highly explanatory for the United States¹³.

The most important level, and yet hardly described by quantitative tools, is the individual one, and the authors here are highly aware of that. Researching the individual religiosity could explain also developments on the macro or meso level of secularized societies¹⁴. This relevance of religious subjective experiences is implicitly demonstrated by the emergence of a “spiritual revolution”¹⁵, as Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas named it in 2005. The two sociologists noticed that people are more and more interested to change the institutional, congregational status of their religiosity with self-centered, alternative and personal forms of religion, or “private” or “invisible religion”. Normally, the individualization or privatization of religion manifests in an opposite relation with traditional, church-related forms of religion, or, as Luckmann already showed in 1967, when the institutional level loses its importance, the personal level of religious feelings increases. Yet, in many of the particular cases analyzed here, this inverse relation is not validated. According to these results, the spiritual quest of contemporary Europeans considered here is not directed towards new fields of ritual performance, but it takes place exactly within the traditional religiosity, emphasizing un-orthodox and folk features of the old religion.

This phenomenon, which contradicts what sociologists of religion called “detraditionalization”, is more relevant and acquires a clearer explanation in the case of Catholic countries, for which the authors take into account the great relevance of folk religiosity, a persistent reality even in contemporary times. The “folk Catholicism” or the “mass religiosity” of Portuguese, Irish or Polish people involves extra-church or extra-doctrinal religious practices such as pilgrimage to sacred places (the famous shrine from Fatima, in Portugal, for example), belief in an impersonal God or life force (similar to the spiritual beliefs of the spiritual revolution), use of magical or powerful objects (crosses, crucifixes, icons, rosaries). Yet, all these spiritual attitudes that seem rather marginal

compared to officially prescribed religiosity do not actually undermine the institutional religion. Contradicting the individualization theory and acting differently than the syncretic-oriented spirituality manifested in other secularized parts of Europe, these Roman Catholic believers are hence in a paradoxical condition: they are “an example of the contemporary reconfiguration of personal religiosity inside the traditional religious field”¹⁶.

Therefore, the folk religious practices performed inside these traditional Catholic environments deny not just the individualization thesis, but also the rationalization and demystification that should characterize the modern religions according to Max Weber. The close connection of believers with a sacred world, and the emphasis on ritualism were considered by the great sociologist as being features of a primitive religiousness. The authors put this development under the influence of exterior factors like the large peasantry and illiteracy preserved until recent past in these Catholic states, along with their lasting agrarian culture. There are also valuable distinct explanations, such as the example of the anti-intellectual and anti-doctrinal Polish religiosity, which means that the Poles gave lesser importance to the principles of faith and instead “they focused on religious practice and building a sense of religious identity”¹⁷. These interesting results concerning folk religiosity and the way it influences the social significance of contemporary religiosity are due to the fact the artisans of this survey decided to introduce in the sociological questionnaire questions regarding this controversial and hard to document issue.

The book also shows some extreme cases. Although Estonia also shares the importance given to the ethno-religious background and to maintaining pre-Christian practices, it is one of the most secularized countries in Europe. The preference shown to anti-intellectual folk religiosity was a reaction against the rational religiousness of ruling Germans and the Lutheran Church that long dominated the Estonian religious life, at least on the institutional level. The opposition against the Germanization and then against Russification (popular unofficial movements similar to those in Poland), along with a necessary resistance to the atheist propaganda, were not supported by a traditional folk-oriented Church as was the case with the Catholic states, which tolerated and integrated their old ethnic beliefs. In the other Nordic state researched here, Finland, the situation seems similar to Estonia. The national Lutheran Church of Finland announces low levels of church attendance, and the Finns are strongly oriented to self-centered practices, giving credit to the theoretical assumptions of the individualization theory. As for the religious landscape of Hungary, another denominationally mixed and post-communist country, the quick religious revival in the first post-socialist years was followed by a decrease of all sociological indicators of institutional religiosity.

Considered from a denominational point of view, the volume provides an important conclusion on possible motives of this proven differentiation between Catholic and non-Catholic states. In their final chapter, Pollack, Müller, and Pickel notice that in historically Catholic countries the commitment to the church is generally higher than in Protestant or in confessionally mixed countries. They also suggest that one reliable justification for this would be the argument implied by Pickel in a study published in 2009: "The combination of a Protestant heritage and a socialist past; however appears to have particularly negative effects on the social relevance of religion"¹⁸.

The authors manage to explain why and how the countries taken into consideration here share common features – such as a Catholic denomination or a post-communist past – but they are also separated by obvious distinctive characteristics. In this last category we could introduce the exceptional situation of current Germany, in which contemporary religiosity is still divided between its two former zones before the unification, West Germany and East Germany. Accordingly, their past political regimes influenced extensively their religious specificity, proving therefore the strong impact that politics has sometimes over religion. The task of the three editors in setting the general theoretical basis of this project is practically fulfilled here, because they are themselves the authors of this chapter addressing Germany's religiosity. But it is not this reason alone that makes the study especially important, but also because the German case, as is almost generally true for the religion in *Mitteleuropa*, seems to be the cultural and religious center where Western religiosity meets Eastern. By stressing the deep influences that capitalism and socialism had, or a normal religious market and the atheist propaganda, Olaf Müller, Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel explain the divide between a "secularizing West" and a "secularized East" and give details on the ways the citizens of the former German Democratic Republic are more and more religiously distanced by both institutional religiosity's indicators and alternative spirituality's ones, even two decades after the collapse of the communist regime, and they are truly more distanced from religious issues than their western compatriots.

It could be stated, according to the case-study in this book, that another interesting and peculiar, highly controversial situation is that of post-Soviet Russia, where "religion seems appreciated and unpracticed, revered and feared, symbolically significant and institutionally weak"¹⁹. It is also a special case in a cross-cultural perspective, because it is the only Orthodox state researched here. Although the Russians consider themselves religious and they share a popular Russian Orthodox culture, showing respect to Russian Orthodox Church's role in creating and preserving a national identity, their manifest religious behavior is rather unorthodox, fragmented, and inconsistent with the Church's teachings and authority, displaying low rates of the doctrinal religious praxis

indicator. Their inclination towards a folk Orthodoxy could be compared with the Catholics' similar attitude. Even though Russians admit the need of a functional differentiation, i.e. the separation between church and state, in fact the Russian Orthodox Church manifests itself as a highly influential institution in the public sphere and policy. This situation is tolerated by both the population and the State, mainly because the majority religion acts on a general cultural level as a valuable tool against Western cultural trends, reacting basically as "cultural defense" mechanism, in the words of Steve Bruce. Marat Shterin notices that according to sociological measurements, Russia is a thoroughly secular society, but not a secularist country²⁰.

Perhaps the Russian case study should have benefited from a comparison with other European Orthodoxies, because the post-communist Eastern religious landscapes seem to remain the controversial and unpredictable issue of this kind of research, proving a conservative structure of the religious field even in the contemporary modernizing times, which makes a Romanian sociologist to call the Orthodox Romanians as showing the signs of a "survival modernity"²¹. The editors find that this part of the "enlarged Europe" shows signs of a still intermediary, unclear status in their religious development: "It could be that the modernization trends there have not yet evolved enough for a clear pattern to emerge. It would seem that in Eastern Europe, some determining factors other than modernization processes have stronger effects on the religious field"²². Predictions of future religious behavior of Orthodox conservative countries in relation to their gradual inclusion into the European modernization process had been already an attractive topic for sociologists. By comparing Greece with the newer EU states, Romania and Bulgaria, Peter Berger claimed that the trend of a "eurosecularity" will definitively affect these highly religious societies, as long as they follow European Union's economic and social development²³.

The final chapter is a useful summary of the main thesis and conclusions that both editors and authors tried to demonstrate along the pages of the book. Displaying proofs of a "differentiated secularization", stressing differences, as well as resemblances reveal an overall need in the sociology of religion to be less restrictive, less specialized, less keenly directed towards giving final judgments on such a complex and subjective domain of human life.

Notes:

¹ This paper is a result of the post-doctoral project PN-II-RU-PD-2011-3-0220, financed by CNCS – UEFISCDI.

² A. Smith, *National Identity*, (London: Penguin. 1991), 73-74.

³ Olaf Müller, "Religiosity in Central and Eastern Europe: Results from the PCE 2000 Survey in Comparison", in Gert Pickel, Olaf Müller (eds.) *Church and Religion in*

Contemporary Europe. Results from Empirical and Comparative Research (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009): 65-88; Gert Pickel, "Secularization as a European fate? Results from the Church and Religion in an enlarged Europe project, 2006", in Gert Pickel, Olaf Müller (eds.) *Church and Religion in Contemporary Europe. Results from Empirical and Comparative Research*, 89-122.

⁴ Gert Pickel, "Contextual secularization. Theoretical Thoughts and Empirical Implications", *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, 4 (2011): 3-20.

⁵ Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel, "Differentiated Secularization in Europe", in Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, (Surey: Ashgate Publishing Company. 2012), 252.

⁶ Branko Ancic, Sinisa Zrinscak, "Religion in Central European Societies. Its Role and People's Expectations", *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, 5 (2012): 22.

⁷ Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel, "Church and Religion in the Enlarged Europe: Analyses of the Social Significance of Religion in East and West", in Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, 9.

⁸ Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels*, (Brussels: P.I.E – Peter Lang. 2002). But, also, before that: Karel Dobbelaere, "Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept", *Current Sociology*, 29 (2/1981): 3-213.

⁹ For the way this situation is also changing, see Ionuț Apahideanu, "East Meets West Once Again: A Quantitative Comparative Approach of Religiosity in Europe over the Last Two Decades", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 12, issue 36 (Winter 2013): 100-128.

¹⁰ "It is obligatory to take into account the cultural and political path dependencies of the countries and the secularization effects", Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel, "Differentiated Secularization in Europe", in Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, 252.

¹¹ Roger Eatwell, "Reflections on nationalism and the future of Europe", in Roger Eatwell (ed.), *European Political Cultures. Conflict or convergence?* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 252-253.

¹² Steve Bruce, *Religion and Politics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press. 2003), 172.

¹³ D. Pollack, O. Müller, G. Pickel, "Differentiated Secularization in Europe", 242.

¹⁴ "The principles of functional differentiation (characteristic of the macro social level in modern societies) are internalized and comprehended at the individual level", D. Pollack, O. Müller, G. Pickel, "Differentiated Secularization in Europe", 252.

¹⁵ Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, (Malden, Oxford & Carlton: Blackwell, 2005).

¹⁶ Helena Vilaça, "Portugal: Secularization and Religious Vitality of the Roman Catholic Church in a Southern European Country", in D. Pollack, O. Müller, G. Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, 90.

¹⁷ Dorota Hall, "Questioning Secularization? Church and Religion in Poland", in D. Pollack, O. Müller, G. Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, 121.

¹⁸ Gert Pickel, "Secularization as a European fate? Results from the Church and Religion in an Enlarged Europe Project, 2006", 112.

¹⁹ Marat Shterin, "Secularization or De-secularization? The Challenges of and from the Post-Soviet Experience", in Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller, Gert Pickel (eds.), *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe. Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*, 146.

²⁰ M. Shterin, "Secularization or De-secularization? The Challenges of and from the Post-Soviet Experience", 156.

²¹ Constantin Schifirneț, "Orthodoxy, Church, State, and National Identity in the Context of Tendentia Modernity", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 12, issue 34 (Spring 2013): 183.

²² D. Pollack, O. Müller, G. Pickel, "Differentiated Secularization in Europe", 248.

²³ Peter Berger, Grace Davie, Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 11.