

A Response to “The Church in Late Modernism: Challenges and Prospects”

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In response to Prof. Isolde Karle’s social-pastoral perspective, I will present a theological perspective on the question concerning secularization. Then, as a response to the challenges and prospects of the church in Europe in late modernity, I will address briefly the relation of Christianity to secularization within the context of the Middle East.

A Theological Perspective of Secularization

Prof. Karle maintains that the decline of church membership and the loss of meaning in the church in late modernity in Europe are caused primarily by the functional differentiation and the secularization of modern society. Karle claims that through the social theory of functional differentiation it was possible to escape the notion that the process of secularization is primarily a history of religious decline and diminishing significance of religion in society. Contrary to this claim, she argues that Luhmann’s theory allows restructuring differentiation as a functional pattern of the religious system itself, which developed strategies consistent with the regime of functional differentiation. This would contribute to uncover the true characteristic of religion as it involves pastoral care and the embracement of the whole of the person. Further, Karle claims that in such a perspective it is possible to regenerate the meaning of secularization and perceive it as “a complex evolutionary process which has effectively led to a transformation of religious communication”

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and thus as "a useful heuristic tool in the social history of religion."¹

I contend that this view of looking at secularization as the result of functional differentiation and then maintaining its positive contributions or possible dangers in relation to Christian faith, though helpful in certain aspects, yet, is not sufficient to perceive the relation between secularization and Christianity in depth.

Is it the case that the disadvantage of secularization is that religion loses since it gives up power and authority, and its advantage is that the image of the pastor is now positive, while earlier it was negative? And if we leave the question of functional differentiation aside and with it the whole process of secularization, should then Christian faith be satisfied with its categorical claims, speculative teachings and dogmas as they were accumulated throughout centuries, without the demand for a self-criticism? How does Christian faith approach secularization?²

As Karle explains, Martin Luther was a precursor in emphasizing the separation of earthly authority from religion and church. However, the theological point here is not merely that all believers are equally priests, and also it is not only about the necessity to safeguard faith from its misuse by politics. The theological point is that Christianity by its nature and in the essence of its reality is secular. It preaches about poverty, denial of the self, love of the neighbor, and humility, which brings the person to the cross. How does church power justify itself to Christian faith? On what ground can any

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- 1 Benjamin Ziemann, "The Theory of Functional Differentiation and the History of Modern Society: Reflections on the Reception of Systems Theory in Recent Historiography," *Soziale Systeme* 13:1-2 (2007): 227-228. See also an earlier article by Isolde Karle with similar conclusions: Isolde Karle, "Funktionale Differenzierung und Exklusion als Herausforderung und Chance für Religion und Kirche," *Soziale Systeme* 7:1 (2001): 100-117. See also Rudolf Schlögl, *Glaube und Religion in der Säkularisierung: Die katholische Stadt – Köln, Aachen, Münster – 1170-1840* (München: Oldenburg, 1995); and Benjamin Ziemann, *Katholische Kirche und Sozialwissenschaften 1945-1975* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).
 - 2 In the 19th-20th centuries Christian theology in the West responded to historical Christianity. A secular theology was maintained by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), and John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983). Other proponents of secular theology or the Death of God theology were: Paul Van Buren (1924-1998), Gabriel Vahanian (1927-2012), William Hamilton (1936-2000), Thomas J. J. Altizer (1927-), John D. Caputo (1940-), and Richard L. Rubenstein (1924-).

religion, even Christianity, claim superiority, as it is faced with the reality of the cross and the need for self denial? How could God, or a theory of God, be used for promoting and enhancing one's own agendas?

The true nature of Christian faith in the terms just described keeps Christian theology in constant examination of its own dispositions and claims. It challenges the whole history of Christian doctrine, all the objective claims about God, which have perceived God as a veritable absolute being within the natural order, and all "the images of God set up in the minds of men."³

In an act of radical self-emptying, the image of a transcendent, distant, and wholly other God disappears, and a realized eschatology and a radical transformation of the present occur. Whenever theology and secularization is brought together, God is perceived as the transcendent ground and depth of the worldly-human reality and experience. God is found in the unconditional care or concern for the Other. This explains Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1906-1945) notion of a *Religionsloses Christentum* (Religionless Christianity), which he used in his letters from prison. Bonhoeffer writes:

God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.⁴

Thus, the holy is not distinct from the common and the worldly, rather it is in the common and the worldly that the holy and the transcendent dwells. This reflects the German word for secularization: *Weltlichkeit* [worldliness].⁵ Thus the claim that the secular is the opposite of the religious is not true, whenever

3 John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 125.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 134.

5 See the discussion in Robinson, *Honest to God*, 84-87.

the "religious" refers to the heart of the Gospel message.

My intention in this first point is to say that secularization is not merely an efficient tool for the transformation of religious communication and the social history of religion, but to add on this that Christian theology is at home with secularization, and thus, it operates very well within the fundamental structures of secularization, and maybe only then it might become meaningful and relevant to one's contemporary context.

Challenges and Prospects for the Middle East

I turn now to the second point, addressing more precisely the Middle-Eastern context or the Arab world. Middle-Eastern societies have not experienced secularization, namely the separation of state and religion. This is peculiar to the Islamic communities, as the religious and the worldly are melded together and there is no room for pure secular governance of state. Since the Arab world is of Islamic majority, Christians and Jews, throughout history, have been merged with the Islamic societies and have participated in the formation of Arab culture and civilization.

Since Ottoman rule started in these countries, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, sectarianism has developed. The occupying authorities, namely the Ottoman Empire and later some European countries, have utilized sectarianism in order to safeguard their own benefits in these countries.

In our contemporary times four main positions might be distinguished. First, the state of Israel separated most Jews from the Arab world, while earlier they were merged with it. Second, some Arab countries have adopted the fundamentalist Islamic system, where no Jewish or Christian elements were involved. Third, few countries have adopted the egalitarian system favoring equality for all people. Finally, some countries have adopted the Arab socialist system, where Christian minorities form an essential part of these countries'

histories.⁶ However, the semi-secular governmental regimes of these countries have practiced repression against religious freedom and religiosity, and this has been a stimulating factor for the rise of different kinds of fundamentalist religious movements. In such a world-view, secularization is rejected and feared, since it is perceived as the loss of religious values.

In Syria, Christians coexisted with Muslims for many centuries, but the question of their future existence in that country is being exceedingly evoked, especially since March 2011, when the ruling system has been attacked by the opposition, reviving with it anti-secular trends of Islamic fundamentalism. Lebanon, with its egalitarian system, has been an exception. However, having a confessional constitutional structure, questions of faith have been most of the time followed by political reckoning. The query of separation of state and religion has been increasingly raised since the end of the twentieth century, yet it remains an open debate. It is possible to observe that the leaders of most important denominations in the country ally themselves with some politicians who benefit from the sectarian system.⁷

Theologically speaking, two main approaches are to be distinguished concerning the Christian position in the Middle East, and particularly in Lebanon. The first is represented by some Christian leaders who came to support the sectarian plan, maintaining the importance of religion for the formation of a modern state, without separating religion and sectarianism from the state and politics.⁸ Thus, those who defend this approach claim that religious authority and the sectarian system, whenever correctly used, may

6 See Paul Khoury, *Turāth wa-ḥadātha: Qirā'a lil-fikr al-'arabī al-ḥālī* [Tradition and Modernity: A Reading of Modern Arabic Thought] (Beirut: Al-maktaba al-būlusiyya, 1999), 20-21.

7 George Sabra, "Al-ḥurriyya wal-ta'addudiyya wal-'aysh al-mushtarak" [Freedom, Pluralism, and the Common Life] in Faḍīl Abulnaṣr (ed.), *Hawājis al-masīhī al-lubnānī: Maqālāt wa-ḥiwārāt* [Apprehensions of the Lebanese Christian: Articles and Dialogues] (Beirut: Bisan Lilnashr, 2001), 46-47.

8 As Lebanon gained independence from the French Mandate, the sectarian-political system could supply Christians with freedom. Thus this approach claims the positive contributions of the sectarian system. See George Sabra, "Religion and Citizenship: The Historical Experience of Protestants," *Theological Review* (Beirut) 22 (2001): 134.

play a positive and a vital role in the founding of the state. And thus there is need to enhance the role of political sectarianism which will lead to the realization of peace and of democratic values.⁹

The second approach repudiates sectarianism and opts for a secular state, appealing mainly to the Declaration of Human Rights as the scope within which equal rights and democratic values might be attained.¹⁰ It is possible here to refer to the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan George Khodr (1923-), who perceives the danger in the mistaken image of God that one shapes according to one's own dispositions and likeness. In this sense Khodr explains that God is not an ally of a sect or a denomination against another, as some claim.¹¹ Thus, the secularization that Khodr defends is about a "civil rule" deprived of all religious inclinations, since for him "national thought is founded upon one's ability to overcome the sectarian affiliation . . . and move toward" affiliation to a national state.¹²

A fierce contemporary advocate of secularization in Lebanon is the Melkite Bishop Gregoire Haddad (1924-), who has been a pioneer of anti-sectarianism since 1960s. Haddad has instituted the "Social Movement" through which he called both Christians and Muslims to work for a society based on secular values. However, Haddad has been viewed as controversial and even as a heretic for his

9 Habib Badr, "The Modern State between Religion and Secularization: Toward Reinforcement of Political Sectarianism in Lebanon," in Faḍl Abulnaṣr (ed.), *Hawājis*, 56 - 57. See also "An Interview with Habib Charles Malek," in Faḍl Abulnaṣr (ed.), *Hawājis*, 124 - 125; and Habib C. Malik, "How Christians and Other Native Minorities Are Faring in the Unfolding Arab Turmoil of 20011," accessed March 25, 2013, <http://www.pass.va/content/dam/scienze/sociali/pdf/acta17/acta17-malik.pdf>.

10 Some in the early twentieth century chose the way of Arab Nationalism. However, the movement declined after the defeat of Arabs in several wars toward the end of the twentieth century. See George Sabra, "Religion and Citizenship": 131 - 133.

11 Georges Khodr, "The Politicization of God," *Al-nahār*, February 3, 2007, possible online access: http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2007&type_id=4&articleID=846

12 Georges Khodr, "Is Surpassing Sectarianism Possible?" *Al-nahār*, November 27, 2009, possible online access: http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2009&type_id=4&articleID=621. All translations from the original Arabic text are my own.

calling the Catholic Church for reform. Haddad also founded the Civil Society Movement. He considered the confessional system in Lebanon to be based on a division of interests.¹³ He has criticized Christian leaders who reject secularization as the result of their being concerned about their own power and benefits.¹⁴

He says:

The repudiation of secularization is like the repudiation of God. This resembles, to a great extent, [our] relation with God and the concept of God. The one who rejects God, saying that he/she is an atheist, most of the time rejects a deficient or distorted concept of God. . . . Thus, God becomes the victim of the person's insufficient and mistaken concepts.¹⁵

He also says:

Christians, throughout the centuries and until our days, have robbed Christ; they have controlled him, subjugated him, utilized him, and exploited him. They made him a commander, a head of a tribe and in our countries more than others and especially in certain occasions, when private benefit agrees with the proclamation of Christ and Christianity.

Thus, there is need to set Christ free from Christians . . . and from Christianity itself . . . and to nationalize Christ . . . in the sense of drawing him back from those who control him, and bringing him to the whole nation. And [also there is need] to secularize Christ in the sense of abolishing the traces of Christian imperialism over the facilities of life, human values, history, politics, economics, sociology, and art, and also over justice, freedom, equality, and peace.¹⁶

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13. Nayla Assaf, "Bishop Makes Plea for Secularism," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), April 24, 2004, accessed June 4, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/Apr/24/Bishop-makes-plea-for-secularism.ashx#axzz2VEIPkjpH>.
 14. "Talking to: Gregoire Haddad" (interview), *NOW*, February 24, 2009, accessed March 25, 2013, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/interviews/talking_to_gregoire_haddad_.
 15. Gregoire Haddad, "The Introduction of Inclusive Secularization, with Positive Neutrality toward all Religions," accessed March 25, 2013, <http://www.gregoirehaddad.com/introsecularsim.htm>. See also <http://shabab.assafir.com/Article.aspx?ArticleID=3798>, accessed April 14, 2014.
 16. Gregoire Haddad, "izaʿ al-fiṣḥ" [The Easter Sermon] in *Al-kanīsa fil-ʿālam* [The Church in the World], ed. Georges Khodr, Gregoire Haddad, Hector Duwayhī, and Antoine Maqdisī, (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1973), 166 - 167.

Thus, clearly there are two different contexts. One is the European context, where secularization is already a main characteristic of the society and is perceived sometimes as a decline and other times as a booming of religion. The other is the Middle-Eastern context, where secularization is partly feared, and partly also welcomed. And for both contexts secular Christianity remains a challenge.