Between secularization and desecularization: what is the future for religion in Europe?

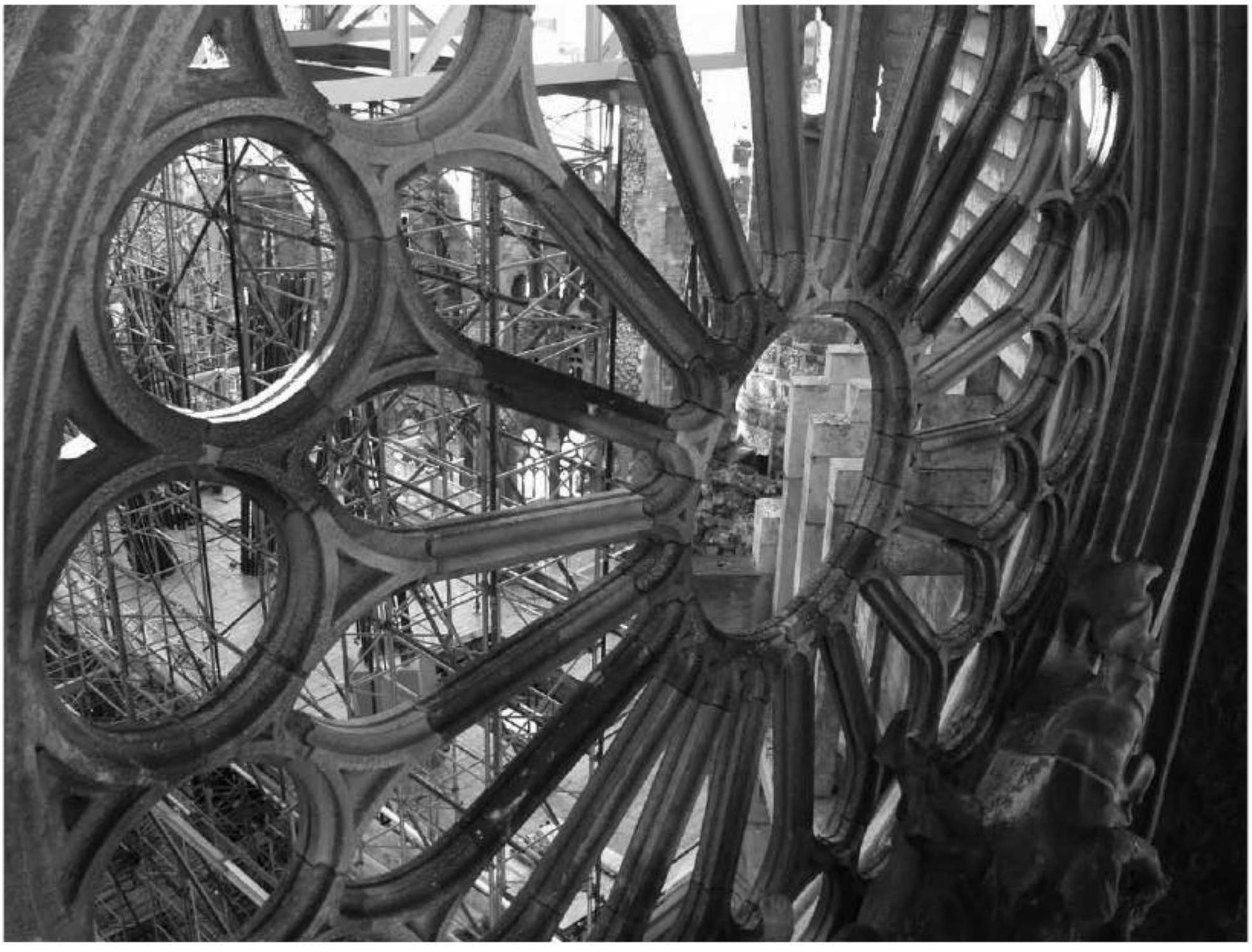
by Maria del Mar Griera*

One of the ironies of secularization (however the term is defined) is that it does not necessarily mean that religion becomes unproblematic. My argument (...) is that, on the contrary, religion becomes more controversial precisely at the time when it is in the process of losing its significance as a force shaping social and cultural life (Beckford, 1999:55)[1] .

The debate as to the present and the future of religion has been given a strong impulse within the sociology of religion and all the social sciences in the last decade. The paradigm of secularization, which predicted a future without gods, has been brought into question and new research has revealed that religion, far from disappearing, is undergoing a revival in many parts of the world. However, in this context, most researchers agree that the big question is understanding the evolution of religion in Europe.

For decades social scientists saw the gradual and steady growth of people abandoning the ranks of the Christian churches in Europe as a direct result of the continent's modernization. In other words, following a line of thought that gained momentum with the Enlightenment, it was believed that the advance of science, the industrialization of societies, urbanization and improvements in the quality of life were incompatible with belief and religious practice. In short, being modern was synonymous with a lack of religion and therefore the future of religion in Europe was expected to be brief and with little impact. If today we were to look at the quantitative data related to the percentage of people who claim to believe in God or who regularly attend mass it would seem as if these predictions were not mistaken. Indeed, Christian churches are much emptier than in the past, civil marriages are increasingly popular and it is increasingly rare for someone we know to tell us they are considering becoming ordained as a priest or a nun. At first glance, therefore, it may appear that the predictions made by the English theologian Thomas Woolston, who stated in around 1710 that by the twentieth century Christianity would have disappeared, or as Voltaire stated in a letter to Frederick the Great, that Christianity would not last more than fifty years,

[1] Beckford, J.A. (1999). The Management of Religious Diversity in England and Wales with Special Reference to Prison Chaplaincy. *International Journal on multicultural Societies, 1*(2). Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001437/143733E.pdf#page=19



have finally come true, with some delay, and modernity has proven to be irreconcilable with religion.

Can we therefore state that the dreams of the secularizers of the Enlightenment have become a reality and religion's days are numbered on the European continent? Not everything is what it seems and nothing is so simple. It is necessary to go beyond appearances to understand the complexity associated with the processes of secularization and understand the implications of the transformations in religiosity on the European stage.

The European exception and market theory applied to religion

The theory of secularization assumed without question that the loss of the faithful by European churches had a clear and easily identifiable cause: the modernization of society. From this starting point they inferred that as the rest of the world's nations joined the train to social and economic progress and underwent modernization, secularization would become the norm everywhere. Europe was at the forefront of a process that, eventually, would spread throughout the globe. However, one need not be particularly astute to realize, as did the American sociologist Peter Berger in his book entitled The Desecularization of the World (1999), that currently, 'the world is as furiously religious as it ever was'. The resurgence of Islam, the unexpected and exponential growth of evangelical Christianity in Asia and Latin America and the revitalization of Orthodox churches in Russia and many other phenomena prove that we can hardly keep supporting the thesis that modernity implies the end of religion. The Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt proposed the need to overcome the idea that modernity comes in a prefabricated mold of European origin that is reproduced all around the world. He used the concept

of 'multiple modernities' to emphasize that modernity is the result of the overlap between many specific factors (historical, political, cultural, social and so on) that make up a specific model that is unique and differentiated in every territorial space and that the role religion plays in each of these models can vary considerably. In short, modernity is not necessarily incompatible with religion. Therefore, if modernity is unable to account for the secularization of the continent, where we can we find the causes?

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The British sociologist Grace Davie, together with Peter Berger and Effie Fokas[2], argue that it is time to be aware that Europe is not secular because it is modern and neither is it modern because it is secular, but, paradoxically, it is secular and modern because it is Europe. In other words, the degree of secularization in Europe is due to the existence of specific internal and external dynamics in Western European Christianity which have redrawn the continent's unique characteristics from the Middle Ages to the present day.

From a very different perspective, there are a number of American sociologists linked to theories of rational choice who strongly claim that anyone who observes the US situation will realize that modernity does not cause a greater or lesser degree of secularization. Moreover, they state that in the US, advances in modernity have been paralleled by a growth in religious adherence and practice. For example they show that in 1776 only 17% of the population were involved with a church, while two centuries later, this figure stood at 62% (2000) (Stark and Finke 2005:23)[3]. So how can we explain the difference between the US and Europe in religious matters? According to sociologists like Stark and Finke, we need to forget modernity per se as the crux of the matter is to be found in the market. In most European countries traditional churches have held monopolistic positions, strongly supported by their respective governments. This is to say that the state has significantly limited competition in the 'salvation of souls', thus hindering the emergence of a religious market. They claim, therefore, that in Europe secularization is not an irreversible trend. The key element is supply and as the Christian churches lose power and new religious providers can compete on equal terms, religious belief and practice will significantly increase in Europe. It is an application of the neoliberal recipe to the religious sphere.

This perspective has received numerous criticisms, most of which are justified, but it is worthwhile keeping it in mind because it alerts us to the need to take a critical look at theories which rely on a simplistic equation between modernity and religion.

'When a finger points to the moon, the fool looks at the finger'

Professor Joan Estruch, paraphrasing the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, argues that no religion is immortal, but there is no reason to believe that humanity cannot create new ones. He adds that we live in a time of religious crisis, but it is a crisis in the sense that a metamorphosis is taking place in religion, and not in the sense that religion itself will be abolished. That is, while it is obvious to all that there is a serious crisis at the heart of the great religions, whether said crisis is an indicator of the decline of religiosity in Europe is questionable. Therefore, in

[2] Berger, P., Davie, G., & Fokas, E. (2008). *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations*. London: Ashgate Pub Co.

[3] Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000). *Acts of Faith*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

spite of the fact that those who define themselves as non-Christians in surveys is rapidly on the rise in Europe, this does not automatically mean that all these people can be considered 'non believers' or non religious. Numerous surveys indicate that between 20% and 30% of young people in Western Europe claim they believe in reincarnation, while a greater number say they believe in something as ethereal as 'energy' is on the rise, as is the number of those who claim they see themselves as spiritual but not religious. In recent years Europe has become fertile ground for the growth of movements which, half way between philosophy and religion, promote new forms of spirituality. There is something for all tastes and degrees, but most share some common features, which include: the rejection of traditional religious institutions, the syncretism of elements from different philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions, and an emphasis on the need to experience and live spirituality. It will take several years to see whether such movements take hold and decide if they are anything more than a passing fad. Nevertheless, it would be intellectually highly inconsistent to fail to take into account that in Europe there is a diverse range of yoga, reiki, personal growth and transpersonal philosophy schools which spread new forms of spiritual transcendence aside from institutionalized religion.

Demography, migration and religious diversity

The increase in immigration from the southern hemisphere has led to a diversification of the European religious map in recent years. The growth of Islam is the most visible sign but we should also take into account the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches and the increased presence of Orthodox communities, Hindus and Sikhs across the continent. For many new Europeans these communities play a central role in articulating the beliefs and religious practices of their faithful while simultaneously serving as a space for socializing and a meeting place. It remains to be seen how this religiosity will be transmitted from parents to children and if the loss of adherents facing traditional churches will spread to these new communities or whether they will remain immune to the European secular tradition. In this context, it is also still unknown whether those who face the emergence and visibility of Islam in the public sphere by reviving the existence of a supposed European Christian identity will provide content for this viewpoint or if the debate will run out of steam.

In short, if when speaking about the present and the future of religion in Europe, we only measure religiosity by adding and subtracting the number of people who attend mass, we will have little else to say. Modernization has indeed left the balance of religiosity in Europe in the red. But if we go beyond this perspective and take into account the different elements mentioned in this article, it is evident that social scientists still have much work to do in order to make sense of the present and the future of religion in Europe.

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