

# DIRITTI COMPARATI

Comparare i diritti fondamentali in Europa

**BRYAN TURNER'S REVIEW: "RELIGION AND  
MODERN SOCIETY. CITIZENSHIP,  
SECULARIZATION AND THE STATE"  
CAMBRIDGE, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
2011**

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Religion has not declined in the way that modern sociologists expected; their dominant presupposition that "secularisation is uniform and an inevitable feature of modernity" (p. 73) has been undoubtedly disproved since the Iranian Revolution – the pivotal event which "offered a singular example of the mobilisation of the masses in the name of religion renewal" (p. 104) - while dramatically collapsing after the events of 9/11. In his recent book *Religion and modern society: citizenship, secularization and the State* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), Bryan Turner fully embraces much of the considerable criticism the secularization thesis has come to face in light of the highly debated issue of the return of religion to the international stage as a driving force in society. Indeed, since the publication of José Casanova's *Public religions in the modern world* (1994), a number of sociologists have deeply revised a theory that has proven a lack of any empirical evidence, thereby admitting its mythical overtones and historical embeddedness. In this sense, as Turner puts it, a Durkheimian Talcott Parsons "did not

accept the secularization thesis that became the hallmark of much European sociology”, insofar as American liberal democracy - as “an institutional and cultural realisation of (Protestant) Christianity” (p. 73) - could reveal an alternative development.

Nonetheless, in Turner’s view, that theory still retains a crucial role in a globalized world. Indeed, although comparative researches on a global scale have made it necessary to overcome a narrow-minded approach to the study of the multiple sides of the interaction between religion and society – beyond the narrative frame of a secular Europe and of a profoundly religious North America – according to the Author the secularization thesis has not to be dismantled “too profoundly” (p. 149). By contrast, it still affects religious beliefs worldwide in what he calls “commodification” or “low intensity religion”: religious faiths and practices, being enmeshed in “a secular commercial culture”, cannot but compete with secular lifestyles in the delivery of commercial goods. The setting up of “mega-churches, drive-in confessionals, buy-a-prayer, popular religious films, religious shopping outlets (...)” (p. 150) are but a few examples of a phenomenon where religion appears to be “merely a set of rituals for bringing good fortune and good health”. Within this frame, the Weberian idea of religion – “an ethical activity of self-creation” – has completely disappeared, for religion, in order to be “a radical faith of transformation”, has “to be concerned” - in Weber’s interpretation – “not with *Glück* but with *Leid*” (p. 58).

From this perspective, Habermas’ basic assumptions on post-secular societies need to be redirected, as far as Turner’s opinion is espoused. While the German philosopher, debating with former Pope Benedict XVI his in-depth investigation into the “post-secular”, has reconsidered his earlier conceptions on the place of religion in modernity, for religious beliefs – “against the German background of *Kulturprotestantismus*” (p. 105) – can still be important sources of meaning, identity and solidarity, Turner believes their enduring vitality in the modern public domain cannot be explained without grasping the huge transformations within religion’s “traditional forms of authority” the secular has produced (p. 210). More precisely, the Author refers to the paradoxical effects of the

use of the Internet “in preserving social and cultural connections” among diasporic communities worldwide; indeed, if it is true world religions could arguably not succeed in keeping their faithfuls’ conscience alive without it, the building of such a global network technology unfolds “democratic characteristics that are also corrosive of religious authority” (p. xviii). Thus, well-established definitions of Islamic holy law – following “Weber’s account of the irrational characteristics of *Shari’a* (p. 152) – that made it in principle a frozen set of religious norms, “closed to further interpretation”, cannot be applied anymore to the contemporary period. Since modern Muslim migrants living in Western societies found it necessary to develop new forms of communal consensus “outside the normal or traditional framework” (p. 155), in Turner’s view any inquiry into Muslim belief system has not to be conducted *via* the reading of official texts or stereotyped sociological constructions; it rather implies the observance of “actual Muslim practice”. This is the other side of the afore mentioned phenomenon of “low intensity religion”: “in the age of ubiquitous media” religious faiths are challenged by the growth of diverse centres of interpretation and, therefore, authority, rather than being hierarchical and unitary, “rests in the local” (p. 203). Processes of hybridity and of borrowing from different religious traditions are the result of the establishment of a global religious market (p. 205). According to this viewpoint, talking about secularization today means recognizing that “religion no longer has a major impact on the dominant structures of culture and society, because religion is increasingly part and parcel of the market. It does not, in Weber’s terms, play a role in ‘world mastery’”; contrary to any generalized notion of “re-sacralization” (Peter Berger, 1999), Turner suggests it is society that determines religion and not, “*pace* Durkheim”, religion that produces society (pp. 274-275). In this sense, it could be argued that former pope Benedict XVI’s unexpected resignation has certainly proven secularization – once cast out from most conservative Catholics as a profoundly biased narrative on the role of religion in modern societies – has now emerged at the very centre and head of the Catholic Church. A pope can now step down as a properly secular political figure, while showing that “charisma” – a concept that for

Weber found its traditional basis in sacred religion – has been inevitably downgraded to the modern discourse of celebrity leaders, both political and religious ones (see Whimster, *Editorial*, “Charisma after Weber”, *Max Weber Studies*, Vol. 12.2, July 2012).

In Turner’s opinion conventional research strategies of comparative religion should thus be reshaped, so as to identify “social trends and movements that are genuinely global and common to a variety of religious traditions” (p. 278). According to this analysis, those phenomena such as fundamentalism, female piety and revivalism, should not be read through the Weberian lens, *i.e.* as “religious rejections of the world”; while they arguably encompass a strong “reaction to modernisation (including commercialism, sexual liberation and secularization)” (p. 229), they do not necessarily have to be considered as backward and traditional strategies against modernisation; they are rather “different, that is ‘glocal’, religious accommodations to the world” (p. 293).

However, although admitting that in our contemporary societies “religion has become a set of institutions that function to support the secular world”, the Author is not willing to yield to the gloomy image of a social which is completely conceived of as an entirely secular arrangement; indeed, “neither religion nor society can survive indefinitely without some regeneration of the creative impulse of the sacred and the social” (p. 31). In his concluding remarks, looking at the steady “rise of low-intensity religion (...) as a death-work signalling” (p. 208) that the passive citizen and modern spirituality are two sides of the very same coin, Turner warns over the risk of “the end of the social” brought about by “globalization in the shape of commercialization and commodification” (pp. 296-297), reminding us that “which binds people together into powerful, typically emotional groups, are religious forces” (p. 296). Thus, Durkheim’s lesson still seems to be valid.