

A Critical Analysis on the Concept of Religion in Dominant Social Sciences Literature: An Investigation on Modern and Late Modern Period

Hâkim Sosyal Bilimler Literatüründeki Din Anlayışına Dair Eleştirel Bir Analiz: Modern ve Geç Modern Dönem Üzerine Bir Araştırma

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Abstract: This study aims at investigating some of the major interpretations on the status of religion in social sciences literature. As the main rationale for this investigation, it will be claimed that the dominant religious discourse in modern and late modern periods has difficulty in understanding this notion in its own uniqueness. In the light of the problem summarized above, the first section of the study will be based on some meta-narratives regarding the process of secularization and retreat of religion from socio-political life in post-Enlightenment period. At this point, dynamics and diversity of secularization among Western World will shortly be looked over. On the following section, globalization discourse and the view on religious phenomena in late modern period will be discussed in the light of some arguments such as de-secularization, return to religion, multiculturalism, etc. After that, the criticisms on the similar meta-narratives on religion maintained by thinkers in late modern period will be given. Some arguments such as 'religion as a commercialization process', 'post-emotional religion', etc. will represent the main subjects of this section.

Keywords: Religion, modernity, secularization, late modern period, post-emotional religion.



Introduction

Remembering the roles of some philosophers and classical sociologists towards modern social change would provide a basic aspect regarding secularization and the status of religion in the Western societies. For the basic examples, Comte's progressive scheme on humanity characterizes the formation of modern societies as being independent from sacred beliefs, religious influences, etc. (Davie, 2007). Organizational model of modern societies concentrates on positive rules of 'scientific stage', instead. Rather than any sacred belief or external powers, rationalism is the main element/indicator of modern societies according to Weberian sociology (McKinnon, 2010). In addition, Durkheim explains religion as a regulatory power created by human beings so that social order can be sustained (Nielsen, 1999). Lastly, to Marxist theory, religion is utilized by high classes as opium in order to govern lower classes politically and economically (Aldridge, 2007). As you shall see, perceptions on religion in post-enlightenment process and the emergence of sociology are based on the secular considerations. In the light these arguments, secularization could be seen as the central subject of modernity (Obadia, 2010).

In this study, popular/major understanding of secularization process summarized above will firstly be critically investigated. In doing so, the promises of modernity such as pluralism, diversity etc. (Beaman, 2003), types of secularization (Dobbelaere, 1981; Davie, 2007) and the diversity on religious phenomena in specific to various countries in Europe will be highlighted. In connection with this, the idea of believing but not belonging (Roof, 1999) will be subjected. This overview is expected to clarify the relationship between modernity and religion beyond the major discourse. Later on the study, globalization will be incorporated in discussion. The role and position of the religion will be subjected in the light of some major novelties and opportunities in global age. Religion will be questioned as a cultural identity in global life (Kurien, 2006). At that point, the concept of de-secularization (Wernick, 2010; Turner, 2010), will be remembered. It will provide a broader sense for the current situation between Western societies and the concept/process of secularization.

Secondly, this paper proposes to contribute to the literature of sociology of religion by problematizing the discourse of absolute seculariza-



tion. That is why; study tends to provide a critical review for some arguments on religion given by some of the Western thinkers. Especially, the lack of understanding of religion as “religion” (i.e. faith, practice, piety, holiness, fear of hereafter, etc.) in global age and recognizing it as something which is advertised and consumed is the other main rationale for the current paper. This attempt will illustrate that interpretations on de-secularization discourse in global period reflect what secularization discourse did by ignoring the faith. In order to clarify this point, the new forms of religion in Global societies will be discussed.

I. Secularization Discourse in Post-Enlightenment Period

It seems impossible to understand modernity without referring to the Enlightenment (or Re-Birth) process and it is almost impossible to understand Enlightenment without referencing Kant’s definition. For him, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another” (Kant, 2010: 1). ‘Another’, at this point, could be seen as religion. Benedict’s (2011) view on enlightenment and separation between state and religion supports this idea. Human beings, independently from any outsiders (including God), could use his mind and make his own decisions thanks to Enlightenment. The synonym of Enlightenment, which is re-birth, keeps some clues about the status of religion in post-Enlightenment age. It reminds re-existence of men without obeying any outsider including religious dogma or restrictions. This idea is actually similar to Nietzsche’s one of the basic views in his philosophy. For him, God dies so that the exemplary human (*Übermensch*) can exist (Nietzsche, 2007). Philosophical base of secularism could be observed on these two thinkers even though Nietzsche does not seem as a modernist thinker.¹ Besides, as mentioned in the introduction part, sociology itself

¹ Rampley’s (2000, 10) following statement could best summarize Nietzsche’s suspicions on modernity and the periodization of history: “There is also a further dimension to the question of time in Nietzsche’s work, namely, the problem of modernity. If, as already noted, one common definition of modernity attends to the evaporation of inherited values, norms and social practices, so too the sense of the modern is characterized by a transformed perception of time and history. In particular, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards the understanding of time came to be dominated by the ‘new/ which, coupled with the Enlightenment belief in progress, redefined the present as essentially historical, a point of constant transition between an obsolete, irretrievable past and an inde-



is predicated on similar secular theories on social life and social change.

Political atmosphere of 19th century is another point that supports the secularization discourse. Because of the replacement between authoritative forces of emperorships and nation-based state formations, religion loses its effectiveness on the sight of law-makers in Europe (Turner, 2010). With the nation state mentality, daily life and cultural differences are organized and governed in the light of secular citizenship formation (Kurien, 2006). These mean that political transformation of modernity is based on the exclusion process of sacred from social life (Bataille, 1992).

Besides social and political perspectives, absolute secularization discourse is also derived from some arguments on individuals and assumptions regarding people's status in the face of religion. Shortly, since social institutions are distinctly organized in 18th and 19th century, religion becomes a more private area for believers and this development weakens the systematized/collective religious practices in social life (Roof, 1999). As a result, one of the well-known assertions on the relationship between 'religion' and 'individual' in modern time comes into view: "believing without belonging" (Davie, 2007: 94). Instead of setting up their belonging via religion, individuals of 19th century face other reference points. For instance, collective memories of individuals address national identity (Zubrzycki, 2010) but religion is no more operative for individuals besides being something between God and human (Evans & Evans, 2010). Dynamics of secularization explained so far could be summarized in three types: "Secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices, and secularization as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere" (Casanova, 1994: 122). To sum up, values, duties and observes of everyday life sustained in social sphere are created by non-religious references (Turner, 2010). When talking about religion; sociology tends to draw this picture that correlates modernity and secularization in the same direction. Moreover, this perspective recognizes the changing status

terminate future full of the promise of perfection. Nietzsche's concern with time thus registers the larger issue of the understanding of time in modern culture, and it confronts aesthetic debates about the relation between the present and the past⁷.



of religion in the same route for every country in Western Europe. It demonstrates that the secularization discourse is affected by the tradition of meta-narrative in early sociological theories (Wood, 2010).

2. Questioning Absolute Secularization: Where and How?

To start with, political secularization seems one of the major changes emerge after modernity. Law makers, policy makers or the other units of nation-states do not directly benefit from religious rules or laws. However, the problem about the secularization is not merely based on the political aspects of religion over societies. The problem is rather related to unifying discourse of secularization for every country in West. As Davie suggested (2007) we need to understand that there are diverse secularization types among different countries. In other words, the face of secularization differs from country to country. For instance, France is one of the most secular countries but law-makers tend to involve in religious affairs in some cases. In order to manage the Islam, for a simple example, French government institutionalizes the training, activity and official status of Imam's (Muslim scholars who organize religious affairs and leads worships) and it is called "French Islam" (Kurien, 2006: 730).

Besides different religions, there were some implementations regarding Christianity in 20th century. As Wilson (1998) states, secularism experience of Western/Christian societies does not have one-dimensional way that ignores the religion both socially and individually. Though the old forms of Christianity are not effective on daily life, new forms of religiosity and religious organizations could be observed in modern society. Similarly, authority of the religious institutions disappears and the 'spirits' of them could be realized "in the life, norms and structures of secular society" (Wernick, 2010: 630). Missionary activities maintained by Christian world over Africa and South America are another exceptional conditions for the status of religion in Western countries. Especially, popularity and commercialization of Pentecostal Movements in Latin America (Turner, 2010; Adogame, 2010) contributes the critical view against secularization discourse. In addition, state involvement in religious affairs is another contradiction through absolute secularism discourse. In Turkey, for instance, after the 1920's, when secularism was supported as a government



program under the idea of Westernization, The Presidency of Religious Affairs was established in order to organize the religion in social life. When pre-existing official religious institutions were abolished, a new institution was founded by secular state (Mardin, 2006). Britain's Anglican Church as an official religious institution (Kurien, 2006) keeps the similar status. For another relevant example, some German churches provide health insurance and for many citizens and there are many schools governed by churches under the state supervision (Davie, 2007). It shows that there is always a policy-oriented attention on the religion and its sphere. Even the most secular nation-states cannot ignore the reality of religion in social life and they cannot slightly exclude religion from the political life. For an interesting example, it is obvious that Western countries mentioned above determine even the content of lectures on religion in elementary or high school curriculums (Kurien, 2006). Rather than operating inside their own countries, colonial movements sustained by the Western countries in 19th century and churches established in order to rule the territories by the power (Roof, 1999) are the other examples that might object absolute secularization.

These examples show that there is not one-directional secularism that ignores the religion in the management of countries. Although modernity announces itself as a secular transformation, the effect of religion have been observable. For a symmetrical reading, if modernity promises a transmission from destiny through decision, being a religious and/or organizing social life in line with 'belief' as a choice could be welcomed, as well (Aldridge, 2006). To sum up, far from being inevitable consequence of modernity, secularization seems a transitory and self-effective practice (Aldridge, 2006). That is why; "[A]ny assumed connection between modernization and secularization becomes increasingly hard to sustain" (Davie, 2010: 165). The literature of modernity and secularization could be better understood by finding some examples that illustrate the continuity of religion on political institutions in different forms. In the next section, socio-political atmosphere of post-modern (or global) age will be clarified in order to understand current status of religious effect and its importance on multi-cultural Western countries. In doing so, hidden or ignored vitality of religion will be come forward.



3. Major Changes in Global Age and Re-Emergence of Religion in Theory

When looking at the promises of modernism, the notions of pluralism and diversity seem remarkable. Especially, pluralism becomes one of the strategic variables in the period in which people and thoughts engage in a mobility process (Davie, 2007). However, reality regarding pluralism does not meet the expectations of this idea in modern period. Especially religion and the perception on religious activity in modern world are discouraged by the political secularism. A major tendency in literature mentioned above is another reason that might prevent us to make a realistic evaluation on the on-going effect of religion over societies. That is why, a crucial question appears on the literature of sociology of religion in contemporary time: “was the modernity thesis *not* adequate in accounting for the contemporary mutations of religions, and why did it need to be replaced or supplemented by the globalization thesis?” (Obadia, 2010: 479). Adogame’s following statement could answer the question by intimating the role of religion in globalization theory:

In response to this erosion of the secularization argument, sociologists of religion took on the significant task of re - drawing the global map of religion in the contemporary world. As a consequence, scholars shifted attention from a consideration of the decline of religion to an examination of the new forms (Adogame, 2010: 502).

In other words, because the literature of globalization includes political, economic and cultural inter-connections that engage in religion (Davie, 1997), the perspective of globalism could better illustrate the place of religion in contemporary societies. This idea supports Giddens’ position. For him (1990), globalization (and of course postmodernism) is an extensive and advanced condition of modernity. In this respect, the literature of religion in a global perspective could help to review the secularization process of modernity in a more advanced way. In order to clarify this statement; some facilities and changings regarding the appearance of religious phenomena in global age would be outlined. First of all, by the migration process into the Western Europe since the second half of 20th century, people from various ethnicities and religions started to live together. Thus, multi-cultural and multi religious atmosphere became more apparent in global countries of West. Especially Christian and Muslim



majority on the Northern side of Globe and their various expectations, rules, values and programs forced the governments to amend some laws that could respond to religious demands (Jenkins, 2002). As a result, some regulations on the institution of religion have been unavoidable for Western states (Turner, 2007). Finally, requirements and consequences of globalization seem to meet the promises of modernity such as pluralism, recognition of diverse ethnic cultures, religions, democracy, etc.

When the literature of modernity was issuing the secularization as an essential point, studies on 'globalization and religion' focus on wide-reaching religious phenomena (Juergensmeyer, 2005). As an interesting point (and an expected point because of diversity), instead of dealing with strict/old reflections, Western countries and governments face complex religious identities and dialogue among different religious groups (Roof, 1999). This is one of the consequences of living together in Global world. People who take a part in religious activities also engage in trans-national linkages and they use the facilities of modernity (Davie, 1997). Believers of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. encounter in everyday life. Thus, the idea of individual secularization in the literature of modernity weakens. As in the example of America, "[I]ncreasingly, the religions of the world are present, especially Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Latino Catholics, as real people practicing their own faiths" (Roof, 1999: 73).

So far, analyses on the actuality of secularization in global age have referred to multi-cultural atmosphere of Western societies and the religious phenomena shared by social groups, ethnicities. However, reconstruction of religion's itself and individualized phenomena on religion characterize another discussion point.

4. Dynamics of De-Secularization in Late Modern Period: Religion as a Rational Choice and Consumption in Global Society

"Empirical and theoretical field of sociology in globalization" as Obadia (2010: 484) indicates, "is generally polarized between two categories of objects: world religions and new religious movements". At first, conceptualization of old religions refers to institutionalized religious activities and authoritative/ruling power of religion (Roof 1997). New religious movements, on the other hand, could refer to religious activities



in global network, missionary movements, religious expectations in the face of migration, harmonization of the religious tradition by social change, etc. (Obadia, 2010). This perspective represents one side of the coin in de-secularized Western societies.

On the other hand, individualization in religious references is one of the consequences of globalization process. As Turner summarised, “[I]n the late modern period, the concept of God, him or herself, becomes increasingly subjective; individuals simply pick and mix from the diversity on offer”, and “[R]eligion, like so many other things, has entered the world of options, lifestyles and preferences” (2010: 56). As you may see, when religion was dominating the social life in pre-modern period and when it was something which should be controlled by states in modern time, religion in late modern period is identified with personal choice and individual activities. At this point, rationality reappears on the study of religion. It also represents a contribution to philosophical debates on religion in global societies. It could be referred by one of the philosophical studies of Habermas (2006) in which rationalization in religion appears in two ways: first, rational choice of being a believer in the global world and second, investigating the discourse of religion in terms of what is rational or irrational.

The first sense of rationalism may characterize religion as an identity. Hybridization and transformation on religious identities (Obadia, 2010) emerge as the consequences of rationalization of religion. If we link this changing to the discussion of individual secularization, Roof's (1999: 62) argument could summarize the general perspective: “People may continue to be involved in rituals and practices but not share in the underlying goals and sensibilities on which they rest, or they may hold such goals and sensibilities but feel that institutional forms fail to fully express them”. Theories on individual and rational choice of religion in de/post secular society are supported by another global developments and social change. Arguments demonstrate a relationship between religion and postmodernism, marketization, neo-liberalism, consumption, etc. Especially consumerism is one of the most significant issues of religion in global condition (Aldridge, 2006). In his study, *Spiritual Market Place*, Roof puts a clear statement:



Similar styles of spirituality in response to an increasingly generic culture in large Western cities - the same T-shirts, the same movies, the same music, no matter which continent. One observes as well racks of mass-marketed books on spirituality in places like London, Paris, and Los Angeles (Roof, 1999: 72).

Carette's argument follows Mestrovic: "Religious emotion is no longer determined simply by tradition and memory but repackaged as a product on brand within the globalized world of late capitalism" (Carrette, 2004: 273). Likewise, "religion", says Possamai (2009: 76) "in our postmodern times -whether we like or not- is definitely part of consumer culture". Then he supports his statement by asserting that every religion and religious groups produce their own commodities to be sold and they put their own values and expectations into the same commodities. Obviously, today's holiness is pictured as a consumerist religion and this holiness commercializes the life styles, education, technology, religious diets, publications, etc. (Turner, 2010). Interestingly, 'business' also exhibits a gender diversification on consumer culture. For Turner (2010), women increasingly participate in the process of new holiness by buying various products they can attach to their body. Mediation and collective prayer activities are other activities of religious consumerism. Similar to Roof's argument, the concept of "prayer book society", which emerges in the UK because of diversity of prayer books and their marketization process by Church leaders (Aldridge, 2006), represent the same course on religious social phenomena.

When looking at the literature of religious consumerism, emotions and faith for the God itself seems weaker than belonging to capitalist culture. This point is detailed by Mestrovic (1997) who suggests the concept of 'post-emotional society'. For Mestrovic, some emotional words such as soul, sacred, spiritual, etc. are commercialized and they are not only discussed by only religious scholars but also everybody in daily life (Carrette, 2004). At this point, de/post secularization process could be observed again. When religion-theoretically-belongs to theologians in past; today, every members (or consumers) of global society could involve in discussions on faith, existence of God, the best religion, etc.

Post-emotional belonging around religion brings the issue of secular-



ization again. The question of “Is that possible to understand or study on Western societies without considering religion?” could be asked repeatedly. Bauman’s argument could again bring us the line of secularization discourse. For him, religiously fundamental demands and movements, which are the post-modern phenomena, engage in rationality, technology, development and the other facilities of modernity (Bauman, 1998). That is why; assuming that religion as a social phenomenon and institution has been existed in different eras but in similar customs would not be wrong.

Beside interpretation of religious phenomena, the problem between postmodernism (or late modern theories) and religion itself is an unavoidable. To clarify this assertion, one of the dynamics of postmodernism, which is being suspicious against meta-narrations, would be addressed. Aktay’s following statement would clarify this ontological and epistemological opposition:

[I]t is hard for religions to protect themselves from the criticisms of post-modern culture, which recognizes every religious imagination about the World as the grand-narrations. Pluralistic belief, random commitment and religious experience would be coherent with a postmodern life style, i.e. the idea of secularization of the culture as pluralism (Aktay, 1998: 311).

This point is crucial for illustrating one of the paradoxes regarding postmodern discourse. When it opposes to meta-narratives in social theory, it implicitly suggests another meta-theory that celebrates unquestionable retreat of religion or absolute fragmentation of religious beliefs in daily life. Actually, this is one of the other ‘outsider views’ in social science literature. It underestimates the controlling power/role of religion as a unique reference point on individuals’ everyday life.

Conclusion and Evaluation

In the literature of social sciences and philosophy of society, religion has always been a subject matter. Both its effectiveness and ignorable status has been discussed in relation to the other dimensions of social and individual life. Secularization process after Enlightenment has introduced extensive debates on religion. As mentioned above, dominant discourse of enlightenment and modernity pictures a socio-political life far from the effect of sacred values or invisible powers. Moreover, in theory, God



is picked up into the minds and hearts of individuals. However, later on the modern period, thanks to some authors who re-evaluate the status of religion in 19th and 20th centuries, the hidden role of religion started to be observable. Especially, de-construction of the idea of absolute secularization over Western societies has been questioned. It has appeared that instead of ignoring religion over society, nation-states in modern Europe problematized the religion and wanted to rule it. Of course, there were some differences on the perceptions on religion; however, it kept its effectiveness on social organizations and individual lives. On the other hand, some technological developments and the fact of migration, which are also observable in modern age, gave researchers a chance to re-examine the status of religion in terms of both modern and global period. Implications, practices and understanding on religion are examined in relation to social chance and status of religious groups. This encouraged researchers to re-evaluate the major status of secularization. At the same time, because of multi-cultural atmosphere of Western societies, various religions started to encounter in daily and political life. Religion, at this point, engaged in cultural identity.

Lastly, owing to neo-liberal policies of Western societies and creations of capitalist market, religion involved in production and consumption process. It represented another dimension of de-secularism. Literature on religion and market started to focus on commercial perspective of religion. Some concepts such as faith, sacred, holiness, prayer, etc. blurred and Mestrovic's argument on post-emotional experience of religious life became a socio-economic reality. To sum up, in this study, arguments regarding secularization and the status of religion in modern and global ages are tried to be shown. When looking at the Western societies, all of the arguments belong to dominant discourse on religion could be observed one by one. However, these leave some question marks on the literature of both secularization and de/post secularization in West. As the dominant discourse of modernity is based on an unquestionable retreat of religion from socio-political life, literature on 'globalization and religion' is based on the discourse of consumption and individualization. Some of the major studies on two different periods have difficulty in demonstrating religion as something based on faith, worship, loyalty,



prayer, etc. When the first period was ignoring or assessing the religion as something made up by human beings for several reasons, today's literature basically focuses on religion as being an artificial phenomenon that is commercialized. In addition, today's literature has difficulty in understanding new religious demands in Europe. Individual expectations are demonstrated in the light of consumer culture, instead. To sum up, there is a lack of paying "closer attention to insider's sensibilities" (Rodrigues & Harding, 2009: 78) on major theories.

On the contrary to foremost religious discourse both in modern and late modern theories, there are considerable amount of people engage in religious activities in the scope of faith and spirituality. For example, one who identifies himself as a religious person may not observe his social and individual reality on those theories. Especially for people who maintain their daily life according to requirements of their religion, dominant theories on religion do not make sense. For a specific example, theories on religion in modern and late modern period still have difficulty in explaining the importance of congregation prayer in Islam, which is 27 times more rewarded than individual prayer (Rippin, 2005), even though millions of Muslims in Western societies prefer to practice in this direction. That is why, literature on religion in de-secular age needs to focus on religion as a social reality and as an influence point for people. It firstly seems possible by focusing on the philosophy of religion as Turner (2010) suggested. 'Insider sensibility', which was tough upon above, would be a good starting point. In doing so, some original aspects of religions could be better analyzed. Secondly, non-Western academicians (philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, etc.) who have been living in Western societies and who share religious atmosphere with their coreligionists might present more works. This could specifically reflect the social phenomena of their religious life. Thus, some other original and interesting points regarding the status of religion could appear. Lastly, in Western societies, transmission of religion among generations (Aldridge, 2007) is an important point. Dynamics of transmission and it's relation with the other perspectives of social life could provide a broader sense for theories on sociology (and philosophy) of religion. In order to make sense of this change and understand the status of religion in the future, sociolo-



gy should make more effort on this process instead of getting stuck in consumerism and individualism.

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Öz: Bu çalışma, din olgusunun sosyal bilimlerdeki yerine ilişkin bazı temel yorumları eleştirel olarak inceleme çabasıdır. Bu çabaya temel bir gerekçe olarak, modern ve geç modern dönemdeki hâkim din söyleminin, dini kendi özgünlüğünde anlatmada yetersiz kalışı gösterilebilir. Bu noktadan hareketle, çalışmanın ilk bölümünde, Aydınlanma sonrasında ortaya çıkan mutlak sekülerleşme söylemi ve bunun bir meta-anlatı olarak sosyal bilimlerde geldiği nokta tartışılacaktır. Mutlak sekülerleşme söylemine karşın, Modern Batı Avrupa toplumlarında 20. Yüzyılda dahi dinin devlet aygıtının bir konusu ya da uğraşı alanı olması gerçeği, bazı argümanlar ışığında incelenecektir. Ardından, geç modern olarak adlandırılan ve sosyal bilimlerde sekülerleşme söyleminin sorgulandığı çalışmaların ortaya çıktığı bir dönemde, din olgusunun sosyal bilim literatürdeki yerine tekrar dönülecektir. Bir problem olarak; tıpkı modern dönemin meta-anlatılarında olduğu gibi, dine dair geç modern dönemdeki algının da benzer kalıplaşmış kavramlar (duygu ötesi din, metalaşma olarak din, vb.) ışığında oluştuğu, dinin kendi özgün içeriğinin ve toplumsal yaşamdaki belirleyici rolünün göz ardı edildiği, örnekler ışığında tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din, modernite, sekülerleşme, geç modern dönem, duygu ötesi din.

