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## Specific Features of Secularization in the Modern Western Culture

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**Abstract:**

*The article focuses on the features of the secularization processes in the modern Western culture. It analyses the inconsistency of the assessment of the religious situation in the Western Europe and the USA. While the European sociologists insist on the increasing secularization, their American colleagues state the increasing religiosity. The authors of the article suggest explaining of these different approaches to understanding the essence of secularization. Hence, both the American and European sociologists agree the spread of religious individualism, but, unlike American, European researchers consider this process as the evidence of secularization.*

*Thus, the researchers attempted to formulate a holistic view about this complex phenomenon. The authors show that with regard to specific features of the secularization in the modern Western culture is not only the autonomy of the culture regarding to religion and the church, but modernization of Christianity. According to this analysis of secularization they establish a correlation between the secularization level of the Western culture and Western Christianity, because free interpretations of the Christian values by the representatives of the churches are fully consistent with the new value orientations in the XX–XXI centuries.*

*As the results of the research of the secularization processes in the modern Western society, the authors of the article come to conclusion that both the Catholic and Protestant churches legitimized increasingly the hedonistic values of the consumer society.*

**Keywords:** *Secularization, modernization of Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, capitalism, consumerism, transformation of society, consumer society.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Christianity is a traditional religion for the Western culture which had determined its basic principles, the system of values and ideals for many centuries. However the secularization process started in the Renaissance culture in the Western countries with its climax in the modern era, when such a radical form as atheism which had denied the existence of God and declared the war to religion and church, appeared. In this connection the question of what is the role of Christianity in the modern Western culture arises. This issue is topical and two opposite approaches to the assessment of the role of Christianity have been formed in the Western researchers' works.

While European sociologists of religion speak about the increase of the secularization processes in the countries of Western Europe and North America, their American colleagues deny the secularization growth explaining that they "do not see any decline of religiousness in the USA, on the contrary all polls show sustainable growth of religious involvement since the times of Independence". The aim of the research is to analyze the secularization processes in the modern Western culture and to give a profound answer to the question what is really happening in the Western countries: secularization growth or religious Renaissance?

## **2. Theoretical, Informational and Methodological Grounds of the Research**

It is obvious that to achieve this aim and solve this scientific problem it is necessary to form the holistic view of secularization, consider all aspects of this complex phenomenon, analyze its social and cultural determinates, show how the secularized Western culture preconditions the secularization processes in the Western Christian confessions.

The subject matter of the research, specific features of secularization in the modern Western culture, means the use of the methods which make it possible to comprehend how the values dominating in the Western Europe and the USA are affecting Catholicism and Protestantism. Theoretical and methodological basis for such analysis is systematic analysis which researches the culture as a holistic dynamic, structural and functional system and that allows finding out what are the main vectors of Christianity modernization determined by the evolution of the basic values and principles of the Western culture. The inconsistency of the assessment of the religious situation in the modern Western world is explained by different approaches to understanding the essence of secularization. While the European sociologists refer to secularization the reduction of the role of church as an intermediary between a human being and God and emerging of the religious individualism which means that the subject of the religious faith is not the church whose role used to be to express exactly the tenets of Revelation without allowing any false interpretations, but a personality able to interpret Christian truths. At the same time their American colleagues though recognize the decline of the role of

church and growth of religious individualism do not consider them the manifestations of secularization. Thus, the reason of such different understanding of the degree of secularization in the modern Western culture is due to different understanding of its essence because though the literature devoted to the secularization analysis is extensive and diverse it seems that different researches reflect different aspects of secularization, but holistic view about it has not been formed.

Let us consider the analysis of the most common approaches to secularization understanding in the Western literature. The neoclassical theory of secularization was represented by in the works of Parsons (1966), Berger (1979), Wilson (1982) and Luckmann (1967) in the 60s -70s of the twentieth century. Its essence is that the notion of secularization is becoming the part of comprehensive theory as well as that the secularization processes are not studied in the historic aspect, but in the modern society. The essence of secularization understanding formed by the authors is that they reduce it to reducing of the religious influence on the social life, to automatization of culture in relation to religion, to reduction of the religious component in all spheres of culture.

At the same time, in the context of this approach the problem of relation of the basic principles of Christianity and modern Western culture are not considered. At the same time, the Christian situation in the modern world is complex because its values and ideals do not correspond with the values and ideals of the West of the XX-XXI centuries, but contradict them. That is why the Christian churches found themselves in predicament. If they continued to defend the values and ideals of the Orthodox Christianity there would be a danger of social isolation and it would give powerful impetus to the decline of the role of church and religion. That is why the representatives of different Christian confessions in the West have chosen a different way, the way of adaptation of Christianity to the modern Western culture.

Consequently, as Bogdanova (2015a) rightly observes, “Secularization must be considered not just as automatization of culture in relation to Christianity, reduction of the religious component in all cultural spheres, but as a much more complicated process of the inner qualitative transformation of Christianity, its secularization due to which Christian component stops its existence in Christianity. This process can be called the secularization of the religion itself”. The more cultural values and ideals differ from traditional Christian, the more radical is secularization of Christianity itself. We suppose that secularization in the modern Western culture is to be understood as the automatization of culture namely in relation of Orthodox Christianity, Christianity of the Holy Scripture.

### **3. Results**

While analyzing secularization processes in the modern world it is necessary to emphasize that the degree of secularization of the Christian doctrine in Catholicism

and Protestantism is mainly determined by different position of the Catholics and Protestants in relation to secularization. The Pope Francis I thinks the danger is that “the secularization process strives to reduce faith and Church to the level of purely private and personal sphere (Francis, 2013). The Protestants assess the secularization in a different way, and most of them treat it positively and believe that it is becoming the behavioral basis for many people in the modern Western culture. That is why their task is to reconcile Christianity and secularization. Radicalism in the Christian secularization is due to their completely different from Catholicism attitude to secular, as according to known protestant theologian P. Tillich, sacred no closer to the Higher than the profane (Tillich, 1963).

Let us consider the main trends of the Christianity secularization in Catholicism and Protestantism in the modern Western culture. And in the core of our attention is the analysis of how the main values determine the Christianity secularization.

It is known that modern Western culture is a consumer society with the primacy of material needs in relation to the spiritual. In such culture the main indicator of a successful individual is wealth and it contradicts Christian ideals because deny property and wealth radically. The Church Fathers pointed out that people’s self-interest in their fall resulted in appearance of private property. They stated that Christ did not possess any property, lived in poverty, and all His disciples should follow it. In his sermons Christ called his disciples to leave everything behind (Matthew 19:27), sell property and to be the almoner (Matthew 19:21). Wealth is denied even more sharply in Christianity of the Holy Scripture than property. In the New Testament love of money is considered the main evil, and the rich are criticized and declared Christ’s murders (Jacob 5:1–6). In the Gospel of Matthew Christ prophets: And again I say unto you: easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24).

The declared position of the Catholic Church about wealth and poverty is authentic to Orthodox Christianity. The Pope Francis I in his apostolic letter says that strive to consumerism, as the main objective of human existence, makes people selfish and indifferent, unable to sympathize with the poor and unwilling to help them. According to the Pope the tragic situation in the modern world is that an individual has the only need – the need to consume (Francis, 2013). However, in reality the secularization of the Catholic doctrine, manifested in absolutely different from the Orthodox Christianity's attitude to poverty and wealth, started in the Middle Ages and became a precondition for capitalism development. The tendency to secularization of Christianity distinctly revealed in Thomas Aquinas’s works, which legitimized private property and even justified its advantages in comparison with common ownership, as in his opinion, nobody cares about common, while everybody strives to preserve and multiply private property. It is curious that a Medieval scholastic following his teacher Aristotle says that possession of private property makes a human being happy, that is obviously coincides with ideal of the consumer society. Thus Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine completely rejects from

Orthodox Christianity's doctrine, whose essence is conviction of wealth and poverty is understood as an ideal, rejection from private property, postulating common ownership in the Christian Community.

Characterizing the transformation of Christian ideals Catholicism Sombart (1967) notices that ideal of poverty in the early Christianity was completely rejected and any believer could become rich due to their own labor. Later Catholic thought was adapting its doctrine to the realia of capitalism. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII's famous encyclical "Rerum Novarum" was published, where the Catholic Church's attitude towards capital economy was distinctly formulated. The Pope argues that private property is consecrated by the Lord according to the natural right and it is fair as it is a result of labor. In Pope John Paul II's encyclical "The Hundredth Year" published in 1991, main ideas of "Rerum Novarum" are actualized, in particular, the idea of the sanctity of private property which is based on natural right and makes a human being free and independent and encourages fruitful activity.

In a whole, though the Catholic Church criticizes certain drawbacks of capitalism, the positive aspects are emphasized, because capitalism provides the individual freedom in the economy. Nowadays there are attempts to show positive aspects of free enterprise in the Catholic literature.

Thus, the secular view on the property and wealth issues has been forming gradually in the Catholic Church's doctrine, and it has never been declared to the Catholics its radical difference from the understanding of economic realia in the traditional Christianity, on the contrary, the attempts to substantiate the proposed innovations by the authority of the Holy Scriptures took place.

The appearance of Protestantism marked the radical transformation of the Christianity doctrine concerning property, poverty and wealth. If the desire for enrichment in Orthodox Christianity was considered a sin, and wealth itself had to be justified by almsgiving, etc., Protestantism states openly that nobody should be ashamed of wealth acquired by honest work, it pleases the Lord and does not need to be justified. Though originally Protestantism emphasized that performing his/her professional duties and asceticism were godly, however, according M. Weber, together with the growth of Protestants' property "their pride, passions, love of carnal pleasures and arrogance are growing" (Weber, 2005). This evolution of Protestants' values is paving the way for adapting of Protestantism to the consumer society.

Modern researchers speak about religious market formation, where the Protestant Churches "could easily adapt to the cultural changes and compete among each other to attract and keep followers". It should be mentioned that the most successful in this sphere is "Theology of Wealth" or "Prosperity Gospel". The main thesis of this study is: "God wants material prosperity to all believers and rewards them with money in accordance with the strength of their faith". The ideology of "Prosperity

Gospel” completely refuses from the idea of asceticism which is a characteristic feature of an early Protestantism, and changes it with the aspiration to unrestrained consumption. The essence of this study fully meets the consumer society requirements, because according to it, striving to maximum satisfaction of all needs, a human being “does the will of God”. Thus, there is a paradoxical situation, when the aspiration to consumption has religious justification. In general it is possible to say that the religion marketization is a characteristic feature of modern Protestantism where believers are considered as “religious consumers”, and spirituality as a commodity which should be sold by all means.

The secularization process in the Western Christianity is manifested quite vividly in its change to the attitude towards the sexual morality issues. Traditional Christianity is known to be very ascetic as it claims that sexual relations are not sinful if they are aimed at children’s births.

Christ condemns not only the act of adultery, but even the feeling of lust. The opposition of the modern Western culture to Christianity is that if Christianity calls to care about the salvation of souls, the XXI century individual stops to percept oneself as a spiritual and corporeal creature, but exclusively feels as a body. That is why bodily needs dominate where the main ones are sexual. That is why the sexual morality has probably never been so liberal since the late Roman Empire as it is in the modern Western society where very positive attitude towards homosexuality has been formed and even same-sex marriage have been legalized. What position do the Catholic Church and the Protestants take on the sexual morality issues?

The Catholic Church’s attitude towards homosexuality has evolved and is as ambiguous as towards wealth and property issues. The degree of Catholicism's secularization is understood fully, if we compare attitude towards homosexuality of the XXI century Catholic Church and Orthodox Christianity, where the same-sex relations are considered as unnatural satisfaction of sensual needs and sharply condemned. The apostle Paul in the book of Romans very distinctly expresses his attitude towards the same-sex relationships of both men and women: “Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural; Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, fueling their lust one toward another, men with men, unseemly, and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error” (Romans 1:26-27). Considering the homosexual relationships as the as the gravest sin Christianity unambiguously states that homosexuals will be deprived of the Kingdom of God.

Originally the Catholic Church’s attitude towards homosexuality quite corresponded to the Holy Scriptures. For example, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1993, the paragraph “Chastity and homosexuality” (2357–2359) qualifies homosexuality in accordance with Bible as a severe form of philandering that contradicts natural law. However the attitude towards homosexuality, contradicting to the Orthodox Christianity, was gradually being matured among the Catholic priests. For example, in 1976 Jesuit priest John. McNeill (1976) published

his work “The Church and the Homosexual” where he called the Catholic Church to stop condemning homosexuality, since any sexual orientation is a God’s gift and a person does not choose it on his/her own and it should be accepted with gratitude. However if in the twentieth century such an attempt to justify the same-sex relationships was condemned and its preacher was expelled from the Society of Jesus, in the twenty-first century the Catholic Church’s attitude towards homosexuality has undergone substantial transformation in the direction from the sharp condemnation to justification and certain legitimating.

Assessment mitigation of homosexuality is, in particular, manifested in the fact that if the Catholics having married for the second time do not have the right to participate in the sacraments of the Church, the homosexuals are entitled to it provided they confessed. At the same time some Catholic bishops show tendency to more tolerant attitude towards homosexuality. For example, the speech of Hungarian cardinal Peter Erdo has a thought that the homosexuals have a lot of gifts and talents which “could be offered to the Christian Community”. He demonstrated tolerant attitude towards the same-sex marriages because they sometimes can set examples of mutual aid on the verge of the victim that is valuable experience in the partners’ lives. The climax of the Catholics’ positive attitude is the position of the head of the Catholic Church the Pope Frances I, who stated that the Catholic Church should ask the gays for forgiveness for the previous attitude to the sexual minorities. And he argues that a person in that condition with good will and seeks for God, who we are to judge?

The Protestants’ attitude towards homosexuality is controversial and ambiguous since the Protestantism is represented by a number of directions. The supporters of the Fundamentalism in the Protestantism, for example, Southern Baptist Convention in the USA in 1988 adopted “the Resolution on Homosexuality” where it was qualified as “perversion of divine standards”. At the same time even the Fundamentalists can deviate from the Orthodox Christian position because they say the “God love the homosexuals and offers them salvation”, which contradicts Bible as it was said above. The Protestants’ even more tolerant attitude towards homosexual unions was expressed in that the unions are permissible, but should be monogamous, as heterosexual.

In the late twentieth – early twenty-first centuries many Protestant Churches quite radically changed their attitude towards the homosexual relationships. Firstly, they started to consider homosexual attraction as given by the Lord; consequently, it is impossible to condemn it. The next step was the recognition the same-sex marriages and their church blessing which the Evangelical Church in Germany, the Church of Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, the United Church of Canada, the Episcopal Church of the United States and others give. Legitimating of the homosexual relationships in the Protestant Churches has gone as far as homosexuals and lesbians have been admitted to the pastoral ministry. For example, in 2010 a lesbian Mary Glasspool took an Episcopal chair of the Episcopal Church in the USA, and in 2009 a lesbian

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Eva Brunne became of Bishop of Stockholm.

Thus, free interpretation of Christian doctrine on the homosexuality issues is manifested in the modern Catholicism and Protestantism. If Bible, the Old and New Testaments express unambiguously negative attitude towards the same-sex relationships, the Catholics take a rather apologetic position towards them, and the Protestants accept them and justify. Both the Catholic Church and the Protestants argue that homosexual attraction is justified by the fact that it is given by the God.

However they ignore the fact that there were eras when there were a lot of homosexuals (Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome), and they did not conceal their orientation, but there are eras where there were much less of them and they do not show off their sexual life. It is difficult to imagine that in the middle Ages and even in the first half of the twentieth century the homosexuals declared their orientation and were proud of it, as it happens in the modern Western world. Modern Catholics ignore the fact that total spread of the same-sex relationships has resulted from the sexual revolution which generates satiety and encourages different experiments, and homosexuality is among them. On the other hand, if follow the logic of the Catholics and Protestants, homosexuality must not be condemn because this attraction is given by the God, it is possible to argue that pedophilia and bestiality also can be given by the God.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The analysis of the religious situation in the modern Western culture has made it possible to define the specific features of the secularization processes in the twentieth – twenty-first centuries. It is becoming obvious that the main manifestation of secularization is the fact that atheism is not spreading what was common for the modern era. The Enlightenment philosophers' desire that science and education development will inevitably result in crash of the religious outlook did not come true because the share of convinced atheists in the modern world is insignificant. And it is not accidental because the natural sciences having reached significant results in the knowledge of natural laws is not claiming and cannot claim on the solution of existential personal issues and is not able to give a person values and ideals, sooth in grief. That is why a person in the modern world still needs religion.

However the question arises: “What kind of religion does a person need in the Western culture?” Orthodox Christianity? But the world has changed. And if Christianity of the Holy Scriptures was absolutely adequate to the medieval culture with the theocentrism as a main principle as it has been said before, the main Christian values and ideals are opposite to value orientations of the present post-modern culture. That is why the Catholics and the Protestants have chosen the way of adaptation of the Christian doctrine to the spirit of this century, to the values of the Western countries' culture, that is according to them should serve the overcoming the exclusion of the Christian churches from the society and in such a

way to strengthen their position. There is a question: “Has the Christianity modernization brought about the growth of its social influence or, vice versa, this modernization gave a powerful impetus for secularization?” To answer this question it is necessary to outline clearly the borders of religiousness and secularization. The Interaction of these two notions is obvious: the wider the religious sphere, the more limited the secularization process will be. If religion is understood in a wider sense, as a system of beliefs and object of worship, then we cannot speak about the secularization process in the Western culture. The number of the convinced atheists only totals to 13%.

If religiousness of the society is identified with the traditional Christianity, then the secularization process has wider borders because any deviation will be treated as the secularization manifestation and consequently the modern Western culture can be considered as at a large degree secularized culture. We suppose that secularization in relation to culture should be considered as a culture automatization in relation to the Orthodox Christianity.

This approach to the secularization comprehension is very important for definition its essence and borders, as it means that secularization is not the decrease of the religious influence in the broader sense, but the drop of Orthodox Christianity influence in the Western culture. The productivity of such position applied to our research is that it has been Christianity that determined the essence of the Western culture for two thousand years; it was the drop of its authority that generated deep transformations in the Western culture. Such understanding of the secularization is significant while analyzing the other aspect, which is not taken into account in those definitions that reduce secularization to the drop of religious influence the modern society. This aspect is that the secularization process is not only characterized with the drop of the authority of the traditional Christianity, but its qualitative transformation resulting in vague borders between the Christianity itself and those things that declare their belonging to Christianity but are not part of it. And that is why it is necessary to characterize secularization as the secularized Christianity leading to the emerge of pseudo Christianity (Bogdanova, 2015b).

This very secularization aspect characterizes its specificity in the modern Western culture and distinguishes these secularization processes from those taking place in other periods of the human history. For example, nowadays in the Western countries nobody is carrying out the aggressive atheism policy and trying to reveal the negative role of religion in the society. It is a paradox that in the modern Western culture the Christian churches, while modernizing Christianity, have turned it into pseudo Christianity, are waging the war with Christianity. The outstanding twentieth century theologian J.B. Metz characterizes this process as the following: “The Christian world” has combined – without much ado, without noticing it – the Christian faith with “natural” bourgeois existence, silently having turned Christian practice of following Christ into the bourgeois practice. The union of the ruling social power, this time bourgeois power, with Christ’s religion, thus having the

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second imaginary victory, - but at what cost, is embodied in the “Christian society” image. At the cost of abolishing Christianity as itself, the Christianity of following Christ (Metz, 1981).

Another Christian scholar Rohrmoser (1991) in his article “The Christianity Situation in the Era of “Postmodernism” through the Eyes of a Christian Journalist” also postulates the idea that “Christianity in the Christians has already stopped its existence”. The logic of the Christianity development in the modern Western culture, as we believe, is that Christianity is turning into its another state while continuing to consider itself Christianity as it is happening in modern Catholicism and Protestantism. Describing this circumstance Rohrmoser argues that there is a paradox situation in the modern society, when everybody is professing Christian values in order to “having legitimized it in such a way, impose requirements for others, connect certain expectations with anybody, but the Christianity's essence has already disappeared” (Rohrmoser, 1991). Thus, the Western culture secularization is a dual process, when, on the one hand, the picture of the world is becoming less Christianized, and, on the other hand, the Christian churches are becoming more modern, interpreting their Christianity into pseudo Christianity.

The Western Christianity’s secularization is vividly manifested in both the modern Catholic Church’s doctrine and in modern Protestant modernism concepts. Emphasis on the real world and free interpretation of the Christian doctrine are the common features of secularization in modern Catholicism and Protestantism. And as the evolution of the twentieth-twenty-first century Western Christianity has shown the ideas of the Christian doctrine have been quite quickly interpreted in accordance with the social values. It is possible that negative impact of free interpretation of the Christian moral values is that absolute Christian morality is turning into relativistic morality, which does not differ from the secular one.

The other consequences of the rethinking of the fundamental Christian moral principles is that the modernized Christianity itself is breaking the border between the vice and virtue that is especially brightly manifested in its adaption to the values of the consumer society and homosexuality. Christianity takes into account that moral role which it had played for many centuries was not to adapt a human being to the reality, but to appeal to realize the moral ideal. At the moment when Christianity appeared, it gave a person absolutely different moral values than those that had existed in other religions and cultures. The might of Christianity was that having formed moral absolutes which had allowed separating vice from virtues and overcoming the crisis existing in the culture. The modern Western Christianity is adapting to the modern Western culture crisis, and consequently cannot be a spiritual ground to overcome it.

One more the Western Christianity secularization aspect is that the secularized society is also becoming changeable and volatile as everything in the modern world, and that is why it cannot provide a person with stable ideological orientations.

According to the analysis the Western Christianity evolution the correlation between the Western culture secularization and the Western Christianity secularization was found, because, as it was shown above, free interpretation of the Christian values fully corresponded to the appearance of the new values in the West culture, which are not compatible with traditional Christian ones. It allows concluding that the postmodern culture is not experiencing the Christian reanimation, as some researchers argue, but secularization processes are increasing.

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