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# Inclusion ideals and inclusion problems: Parsons and Luhmann on religion and secularization

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**Abstract**

This paper builds upon the theoretical work of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann and offers a critical reconstruction of their views on religion (Christianity) and secularization in the western world. It discusses the relation between the functional differentiation of modern society, the individualization of inclusion imperatives and the changing expectations regarding inclusion/exclusion in religious communication. From this perspective, it analyzes secularization in terms of perceived problems of inclusion in religious communication, and in terms of the reactions of Christian religions to these perceived problems. It thereby shows how the theories of Parsons and Luhmann are useful for empirical and historical research, and how they open up new perspectives for empirical and historical research.

**Keywords**

Niklas Luhmann, Talcott Parsons, inclusion/exclusion, secularization, inclusion

**Introduction**

Throughout Niklas Luhmann's entire scholarly oeuvre, there has been a strong emphasis on the conditions and consequences of social differentiation. Luhmann's analyses focus, more particularly, on the basic *forms of social differentiation*, notably segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation. Luhmann has primarily discussed and analysed the birth of the modern world in terms of the transition to the latter form of differentiation. He saw this form as a specific historical arrangement that starts to emerge in the late Middle Ages and is recognized as disruptive only in the second half of the eighteenth century.

In an early programmatic text, Luhmann argued that this differentiation form begins as a differentiation of roles. It already occurs in societies primarily characterized by stratification, but 'it gains momentum only if at least two different roles organize their complementary expectations around a

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specific function – for example, clerics and laymen, politicians and the public, teachers and pupils’ (Luhmann, 1977a: 35). This form thus not only depends on the specification of *expert* roles, but also on the articulation of corresponding *public* roles. The public needs to be differentiated in role terms, as well. Each system needs to enact its own public: the child (who is ‘discovered’ in the late-eighteenth century) in the case of education, the electorate in the case of politics, public opinion for the mass media, consumers organized by markets for economic production, fans and spectators in the case of sport, medical ‘cases’ for the system of health care, and so on. Functional differentiation thus gains momentum when these systems start to define their ‘clientele’ in universalistic, totalising terms. For Luhmann, this differentiation form thus depends on the *inclusion* of large populations in differentiated public roles.

If the society introduces compulsory school education for everyone, if every person regardless of his being nobleman or commoner, being Christian, Jewish, or Moslem, being infant or adult, is subject to the same legal status, if ‘the public’ is provided with a political function as electorate, if every individual is acknowledged as choosing or not choosing a religious commitment; and if everybody can buy everything and pursue every occupation, given the necessary resources, then the whole system shifts in the direction of functional differentiation. (Luhmann, 1977a: 40; see also Luhmann, 1997: 618–634)

Not surprisingly, Luhmann also discussed secularization as a consequence of social differentiation. Building upon classical sociological theory, he argued that the increasing difference between the primary subsystems of modern society had forced religion to ‘adapt’ (see, for example, Chaves, 1994; Dobbelaere, 2002). In the modern era, religion has become a matter of special interest at the societal level: one among many instead of the one that provides the foundation for the many. It ‘has gained recognized autonomy at the cost of recognizing the autonomy of the other subsystems, i.e. secularization’ (Luhmann, 1985a: 14). Interestingly, however, Luhmann also referred in this context to changes in the social regulation of inclusion and exclusion. If social differentiation implies the differentiation of the rules for inclusion and exclusion, then each system has to regulate – on its own – the participation of large populations. As with other systems, religion has to specify the criteria for participation in its lay or public roles. While it might be said that persons have come to be conceived as incorporated into religion as ‘believers’, as adherents of single ‘churches’ in the modern era, it also seems clear that religion has difficulty tackling the issue of inclusion. In comparison with several other function systems, it has difficulty elaborating analogous forms of commitment. From this comparative point of view, secularization may be analysed in terms of the specific *inclusion problems* of religion (see Luhmann, 2012: 216–221). The purpose of this paper is to explore and discuss the relevance and implications of Luhmann’s reflections on inclusion/exclusion and religion/secularization.

For this purpose, it is – as so often – helpful to compare Luhmann’s approach with that of Talcott Parsons (see also Tyrell, 1996; Vanderstraeten, 2002). In many ways, Luhmann has indeed worked ‘after’ Parsons (in both senses of the word: in the time after as well as inspired by). Hereafter I will discuss both Parsons’ and Luhmann’s approaches of religion and secularization. I will thus not just look at the historical and empirical material they present, but also at the ways they treat religion and secularization in corresponding theoretical terms. Overall, the focus will be on Christianity – because both Parsons and Luhmann for the most part limited their analyses to this world religion.

Neither Parsons nor Luhmann have hitherto had as large an impact on the field of sociology of religion as one might have expected. Parsons (1902–1979) discussed religion particularly during the last ten or fifteen years of his life. In the last book that he saw into print, however, he depicted his contributions to the sociology of religion as ‘work-in-progress’ (Parsons, 1978: 167–172). These contributions also did not receive much (if any) attention in the scholarly community. Since the ‘critical’ 1960s and 1970s, most of his work has met with outright rejection. Until now, the ensuing general ignorance about his theoretical framework has also stood in the way of any serious discussion of his contributions about religion and religious change. Luhmann (1927–1998), too, had to leave his work

unfinished. Next to a number of papers, he was the author of two books on religion: *Funktion der Religion* (Luhmann, 1977b) and *A Systems Theory of Religion* (Luhmann, 2012) – but it should be noted that the first of these books is a collection of five essays, while the second one is a posthumously published, unfinished manuscript. Both this fact and the link with Parsons probably also account for the relative neglect of Luhmann's work in the field of sociology of religion. In this paper, however, I will not only try to reconstruct the thrust of both Parsons' and Luhmann's views on the relation between religion (Christianity) and inclusion, but will also indicate how their approaches lead to new insights into religion and secularization in modern society.

## Inclusion ideals

In Parsons' oeuvre, the notion of inclusion gained prominence at a relatively late stage. Parsons incorporated the notion in his theoretical framework in order to adjust and complement the classical Durkheimian thesis, which says that increasing differentiation is related to, and dependent on, demographic changes (Durkheim, 1930). He argued that statistical changes in the size and/or density of the population (including urbanization) did not suffice to make the difference. He concerned himself instead with the *social mechanisms* used to regulate participation in the relevant social systems – thereby directing attention towards the changing forms of membership and of 'acceptance' within society and its subsystems (cf. Marshall, 1950). In the posthumously published monograph *American Society*, for example, Parsons (2007: 74) listed a number of expansive inclusion mechanisms: the introduction of the poor laws, the beginnings of formal education and mandatory schooling for all, the extension of the franchise, the acquisition of formal citizenship by immigrants. For Parsons, inclusion referred to the assignment of civil rights to increasing parts of the population – eventually to every single individual, irrespective of seemingly natural qualities such as race, gender, kinship or ethnicity. Increasing inclusion meant that increasing parts of the population were expected to 'have developed legitimate capacities to "contribute" to the functioning of the system' (Parsons, 1962: 22; see also Kivisto, 2004; Sciortino, 2010).

In this regard, Parsons' analyses of inclusion mechanisms also shed light on the ways in which he connected religious and societal changes. In his work, Parsons did not attempt to provide a detailed historical account, but focused on some significant events, on some 'essential constituents' and 'crucial developments' (Parsons, 1967: 391). In spite of the institutionalization of a hierarchical relationship between the clergy and the laity, the conception of clerical office that developed in the Middle Ages already signalled for Parsons an active concern with inclusion, with the expansion of an upgraded membership in the Church of Christ. In an article entitled 'Christianity and Modern Industrial Society', he not only stressed 'the firm establishment of the principle that priesthood was an office with powers and authority' (Parsons, 1967: 398), but also underlined that 'there has been *extension* of the range of institutionalization of the values, above all through the influence on the laity through the secular clergy' (Parsons, 1967: 401). In Parsons' reading, this upgraded form of membership implied that Christianity could not remain primarily a specialized or monastic concern, as it had become during the so-called Dark Ages. It signalled to the contrary that religion was to be carried out more or less equally and fully by all members of the population. Embedded within the hierarchical society of medieval and early-modern Europe, however, the relationship between the clergy and the laity had to remain asymmetric and hierarchical. Parsons spoke of the 'medieval synthesis' of the Holy Roman Empire as 'a stage in a process of development' (Parsons, 1967: 396).

As a sociologist of modernity, Parsons' interest lay mostly in two later 'stages' of this process of upgrading and inclusion of all parts of the population. The first of these was initiated by the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant reformers no longer perceived the clergy as the manipulators of divine grace, as the mediators between God and men. The sacraments became merely symbolic affirmations of faith and commitment to the Christian message. As a consequence, the distinction between the clergy and the laity lost much of its religious significance. Every individual was 'granted' the same, immediate kind of contact with God. The abolition of the religious orders pointed in the same

direction. It served to underline the view that a fully religious life could be lived in the ordinary status of the lay citizen and not only as a monk or ordained priest. Although at first sight this interpretation of the Reformation parallels closely that provided by Weber in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, Parsons drew quite different conclusions: 'This change has often been interpreted as reflecting a relaxation of standards of religious rigor . . . There has, however, been another interpretation of the change. This is to the effect that the change was not primarily a downgrading (religiously speaking) of the clergy, both regular and secular, but rather an upgrading of the laity' (Parsons, 1978: 306).<sup>1</sup> For Parsons, Protestantism thus made a religiously autonomous entity of the individual, responsible for their own religious concerns. Its idea of 'universal priesthood' expressed the new social expectations regarding the realization of inclusion. The Reformation initiated an upgrading of the roles, which are open to each and every individual within (Protestant) Christianity.

After the Peace of Westphalia, which brought in 1648 an end to the wars of religion in Europe, both Protestant and Catholic rulers could assume that their 'subjects' – that is, the members of the population *subject* to their authority – would adhere to their religion. The famous Latin formula *cuius regio, eius religio* [whose realm, his religion] expressed the right of rulers to determine which religion would hold sway within their political realm. In Parsons' reading, the formula not only coordinated state and religious identity; it also maintained a distinction between state and religion. Stated somewhat differently: while the order of the formula points in the direction of what we would today call the regulation of religion by the state, the formula does not say a great deal about *how* the ruler's religion would be the religion of the realm. The model that emerged after the Peace of Westphalia promulgated the idea of a state religion, but thereby brought with it the consequential notions of what we have learned to call 'religious minorities' and the then already prevalent idea of the possibility of 'tolerance' of those minorities (Beyer, 2012: 115). In Parsons' reading, the coexistence of different religious affiliations within one political territory paved the way for the next stage in the inclusion process. The idea of religious tolerance not only made it possible to think of membership in religious organizations as a matter of private choice; it also made it necessary to develop more encompassing notions of inclusion. Parsons spoke of 'the conception of the legitimacy of a pluralistic religious constitution internal to the principality, a first step taken in Holland and England after the Reformation' (Parsons, 1978: 245). But he immediately added: 'Only in our own time, however, . . . the individual is held to have a right to the religious adherence, including beliefs, of his own choice and . . . that right includes recognition of the religious legitimacy of the adherents of other faiths' (Parsons, 1978: 245–246).

For Parsons, this stage came more or less to completion in his own time and nation. From the outset, the (North) American religion had been forged by the flight from religious oppression and Puritanism. It also made the transition towards 'the denominational phase'. The American system of 'denominational pluralism', Parsons argued, 'may be regarded as a further extension of the same basic line of institutionalization of Christian ethics, which was produced both by the medieval synthesis and by the Reformation' (Parsons, 1967: 412). Parsons saw both the constitutional separation between church and state (disestablishment) and the constitutional protection of religious freedom as defining characteristics of the American religious system, which allowed this system to develop along voluntary and pluralistic, denominational lines (see also Parsons, 1978: 202). Parsons also clearly regarded freedom of choice and voluntarism in religion as an advance in religion. The denominational phase was, in his view, 'a major further step in the emancipation of the individual from tutelary control by *organized* religious collectivities' (Parsons, 1967: 414, his emphasis). He specified his viewpoint as follows:

The individual is responsible not only for managing his own relation to God through faith *within* the ascribed framework of an established church, which is the Reformation position, but for choosing that framework itself, for deciding as a mature individual *what* to believe, and *with whom* to associate himself in the organizational expression and reinforcement of this commitments. This is essentially the removal of the last vestige of coercive control over the individual in the religious sphere; he is endowed with full responsible autonomy. (Parsons, 1967: 414, his emphases)

In Parsons' view, the voluntary–associational form of modern American religion thus 'empowered' the individual in ways which had not been possible in earlier developmental stages.

The processes of upgrading and inclusion during 'the denominational phase' also necessitated basic socio-cultural changes. It made it necessary to generalize community ideals. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, Parsons argued, America's religion was about to incorporate much broader and diverse influences. In a lecture on 'Religion in a Modern Pluralistic Society', for example, he maintained: 'This [religious] base, from a pluralistic one in Protestant terms, has become an ecumenical one in Judeo-Christian terms and may well broaden still further' (Parsons, 1966: 135). In an article on 'Christianity', originally written for the 1968 edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, he added: 'The crucial phenomenon is the inclusion of the non-Protestant groups in a national community which, though of course secular in government, still retains its religious character as a holy community in the transformed sense of a "nation under God"' (Parsons, 1978: 203; see also Parsons and Platt, 1973: 42). Influenced by the social and ecumenical movements of the 1960s and 1970s (including the election of the Roman Catholic John F Kennedy to the office of President of the United States), as well as by the work of his former student Robert Bellah, Parsons stressed the genesis of a *civil or secular religion*.<sup>2</sup> He argued that the genesis of a broad, generalized civil religion was capable of supporting and sustaining American society by overriding its religious, ethnic and social diversity. (Similar developments, he assumed, were about to take place in Europe and elsewhere in the western world, too. He particularly welcomed the ecumenical interests expressed by the Roman Catholic Church and pope Paul VI after Vatican II.) In this view, the secularization of Christian religious values had to be understood as an evolution towards more inclusive forms of religion.

Parsons did not question a key idea of the 'mainstream' secularization literature of his time – namely, that the choice for specific religious commitments was becoming 'privatized' and that traditional religious institutions were made 'invisible' at the societal level (e.g., Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1967). From Parsons' perspective, religious pluralism *had* to go hand in hand with the reduction of the societal influence of specific religious commitments. 'It is clear that the more extensive the range of denominational inclusion within the American system the more the denominationally specific components of religious belief, practice and organization must be "privatized"' (Parsons, 1966: 134; see also Parsons, 1967: 385–421, 1978: 307–312). However, in his perspective, increasing diversity and increasing pluralism also *had* to be compensated for at the value-oriented level. The individualization of inclusion regulations called for broader, more encompassing value patterns. In order to remain the property of the whole, increasingly diverse and pluralistic societal system, religious frameworks had to become increasingly generalized (Lechner, 1998; Turner, 2011: 228–235; Vanderstraeten, 2014a; Warner, 1993: 1046–1048). Parsons welcomed the secularization and generalization of religious values in the American 'melting pot', because, idiosyncratically, he identified secularization with a process of opening up the societal community to a larger and increasingly diverse population.

At this point it is not difficult to see how Parsons' functionalist account of religion shaped his reading of the available historical and empirical analyses. Parsons clearly exhibited a strong tendency to conflate systemic requirements with empirical history (see also Sciortino, 2010: 248). In Parsons' view, increasing diversity and plurality had to be compensated for by enhanced control or coordination at the value level. He expected near-consensus among the population members at the level of the ultimate values or last resources. He clearly did not doubt the necessity of broadly shared habits of the heart: 'they must share in what in some sense is a common religion' (Parsons, 1978: 250). In his view, the generalization of religious values had to complement the growing diversity of individual religious options. It had to affirm and sacralize the structures that afforded inclusion ideals protection within modern (American) society. In this sense, Parsons' view on religion also stayed close to the original, etymological meaning of the word 'religion' (*religio*: bond). The influence of Durkheim's classic definition is evident, too: whatever else it is, a society is a moral/religious community. In reaction to increasing differentiation and inclusion, the generalization of religious values had to arrange for 'organic solidarity', as Durkheim would have said.

The limitations of this approach also become visible when the circular structure of Parsons' analyses is taken into account. Parsons not only argued that religion (Christianity) legitimated the institutionalization of the ideal of full inclusion in modern (American) society. Inversely, he also assumed that increasing inclusion could not but enhance the relevance of religion in modern society. The institutionalization of membership ideals was bound to strengthen the community's ultimate values, because it would imply that larger parts of the population would be motivated by the same values, by the same civil religion. Parsons believed that in this generalized form religion was able to direct and control the choices made by 'socialized' individuals in secular spheres. It was able to set ethical standards for life in this world. From this point of view, Parsons defined secularization as a transformation process 'which has sanctified, by inclusion, and moral upgrading component after component of what was originally conceived to be the world by contrast with the spiritual order' (Parsons, 1978: 253). In his own uncommon and idiosyncratic way, he also spoke of 'each additional step in secularization, in the sense of the institutionalization of Christian patterns in the secular world' (Parsons, 1978: 261).

The emphasis on increasing value generalization thus matched with that on increasing inclusion. In this sense, Parsons' view on the societal community and its value commitments made it nearly impossible to question or interrogate the 'master trend' of increasing inclusion. His notion of inclusion did not have an antonym. Although there are some references to forms and modes of exclusion in his later work, especially in his discussion of the social condition of the 'Negro American' (see, for example, Parsons, 1965: 742–744; 1978: 208), *structural problems* of inclusion or membership were marginalized in this theoretical framework. On the basis of our reconstruction of Parsons' theoretical framework, however, it might already be seen how and why Luhmann proposed to take *inclusion problems* as the point of departure for his post-Parsonsian analyses of religion and secularization in modern society.

## Inclusion problems

In contrast with Parsons, Luhmann put more emphasis on the functional differentiation of modern society. Not unimportantly, he always preferred to use the untranslatable term *Ausdifferenzierung*. In his view, the function systems differentiate 'out' within society. They 'carve' out their own territories; they generate their own dynamics and produce their own *eigenvalues*; they acquire a specific (namely, 'autopoietic') form of autonomy. In Luhmann's view, moreover, the transition to the form of functional differentiation takes place in a somewhat uncoordinated, conflictual and chaotic manner. While different systems may be confronted with similar expectations at the societal level, they also aim to define their own functionalities.

As with the completion of a puzzle, the pieces that have already been differentiated have a suggestive influence on what can possibly and must necessarily be connected to them. But, unlike with a puzzle, it is not certain from the outset that a complete picture will be produced or that it will be understandable as a whole. (Luhmann and Schorr, 2000: 30)

Against this background, Luhmann also proposed to redefine the notion of inclusion. For Parsons, as we have seen, inclusion meant full membership for every individual in the societal community. For Luhmann, the form of functional differentiation is dependent on the *differentiation and functional specification of the rules for inclusion and exclusion*.<sup>3</sup> For the different function systems, the institutionalization of inclusion imperatives may serve to ensure the participation and active collaboration of sufficiently large populations. It may allow them to develop their own *eigenvalues*. But the ensuing *heterogeneity* of inclusions and exclusions in modern society may also lead to specific challenges and problems – both at the individual and at the societal level (see, for example, Luhmann, 1997: 707–776).<sup>4</sup>



Luhmann thus placed emphasis on the mutually constitutive relationship between inclusion and functional differentiation. In order to grasp some of the corresponding challenges, it should be taken into account that inclusion ideals do not – and cannot – simply realize themselves in modern society. Especially since the end of the eighteenth century, for example, all kinds of ‘search engines’ have been put to use in order to provide detailed population data: registers of births and deaths, general population censuses, administrative statistics of all kinds. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the legislators intervened in many ways – for example, by imposing mandatory schooling for all children (education) or enabling universal franchise (politics). In the welfare state, which developed after the Second World War, widening access to social services has also been the object of numerous state interventions. Inclusion in religion, however, has never been an issue of comparable concern. In Europe, not even the so-called State Churches received similar forms of support (see Luhmann, 1977b: 232–242; see also Vanderstraeten, 1999). As a consequence, the ‘modern’ religious collectivities had and have to develop their own strategies to recruit their public, to motivate the laity to worship. They also have to cope with the risk that they might fail to attract and include large numbers of people; they have to be able to deal with the fact that people might turn themselves away from (this form of) religion.

Luhmann formulated this point of view also somewhat differently. He did not question that the comparatively early differentiation and specification of religious *eigenvalues* had been able to trigger a broad range of other processes of functional differentiation within society (see Luhmann, 1989: 259–357). However, he argued that religion has had to restructure and reconceive itself as a consequence of the transition to the form of functional differentiation. When functional differentiation wins primacy over other forms of differentiation, Luhmann argued, religion has to ‘adapt to this order and has to become a functional subsystem . . . At least it will be treated as such whether it finds this situation comfortable or not and whether or not it prefers to remain maladaptive to some extent’ (Luhmann, 1985b: 34–35). In line with what has been argued above, we might also say that the differentiation of inclusion imperatives put the religious collectivities to work. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these collectivities were increasingly perceived and treated in ‘modern’ ways – even if they themselves did not (want to) change. They had to ‘adapt’; they had to specify their own premises, their own rules for inclusion and exclusion. Although, for example, the Christian Churches retained existing ceremonies of enrolment and admittance, such as baptism, they were forced to develop more active ways to evangelize, to include large populations.

Seen in this light, it is clear that the specification of these inclusion rules is both socially and historically contingent. However, the way in which religion is conceived at particular times and in particular places also has consequences. Although Luhmann did not provide detailed historical analyses of this (mal-)adaptation process and its consequences, some examples may illustrate how the restructuring of religion took place.

First, attention can be directed to the specification of the membership criteria in the system of religion itself. ‘It can be argued, on the basis of available historical evidence, that, especially in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, religion became defined as ‘Church(es)’ – with a focus on exclusive membership or adherence (whether voluntary or ascribed), as well as on beliefs and practices (see, for example, Beyer, 2012: 117).’ Just as, for instance, modern nations were ‘imagined’ as political communities to which citizens (no longer ‘subjects’) fundamentally belonged, the Churches tried to incorporate their members as believers in encompassing and continuous ways. In this sense, many attempts were made to ‘church’ different national populations in the modern era. Indeed, *popularization* became an important imperative for the Churches; the members had to be immersed in the Church to which they belonged (see, for example, Chaves, 2004; Finke and Stark, 2005; McDannell, 1998; Sperber, 1984).<sup>5</sup> In this sense, too, participation in the system of religion has thus gradually come to be understood and measured in terms of attendance, membership, belonging, or commitment to the tenets and practices of specific religious organizations.

Also of significance is the concomitant rise of ‘worldly’ activities in the Christian Churches. Of course, these churches could build on a long tradition of providing charity for the poor and indigents;

but in the nineteenth century they clearly expanded their range of activities. Religiously committed organizations were established almost everywhere: in education, health care, politics, the mass media, the economy, etc. Often the aim was to ensure that fellow believers could live their entire life in their own circle: from the cradle to the grave. Building upon Luhmann's approach, this type of *worldly activism* may also be perceived as a way to control the inclusion of large populations in the system of religion. By investing 'in the world', larger parts of the population could be committed to the religious projects (Luhmann, 2012: 216–221). For the Christian Churches, however, this worldly activism also had unintended consequences. If religious organizations are active in the world, they also need to adapt to the world in order to make a difference. They have to contribute to other functionalities. They have to adhere to other *eigenvalues*, such as medical, educational, political or entertainment values. There is now a significant body of historical research that deals with the competing value commitments in this type of worldly activism.<sup>6</sup> With Luhmann, the motives behind this worldly activism of the Christian Churches may be related to the primacy of functional differentiation. Because non-participation in religious communication often has but few consequences for individuals in modern society, it becomes particularly difficult to tackle the inclusion problems within religion itself.

Seen against this background, some characteristic religious developments in the modern era may be put into perspective. Until the early-modern era, being excluded from religion (that is, excommunication) often meant exclusion or banishment from the society at large. In the functionally differentiated society, however, individuals can forego participating in religion without being excluded from other social systems. It may be added that the costs of exclusion from a range of other social systems (school education, the labour market, legal protection, and so on) currently often outweigh those of exclusion from organized forms of religion. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the 'modern' Christian Churches have searched for alternative, compensatory strategies and that they have tried to establish strong links with other, more successful systems. But it should also be noted that the ensuing relocation of the centre of gravity of Christianity – from the internal, religious domain to worldly activism – has been a very important consequence of secularization. Against this background, it may be argued further that these reactions to the perceived inclusion problems account for the relatively abrupt transition from ascetic Protestantism to a eudemonic and theologically undemanding civil religion (and not vice versa – as Parsons suggested).

In the secularization chapter of his posthumously published, unfinished monograph *A Systems Theory of Religion*, Luhmann developed his argument mostly in another direction. Pointing to the existence of less-organized forms of 'spirituality' and religion, he questioned the historically contingent identification of participation in religion with church membership and belonging. The 'church form' may have acquired a dominant position within the modern system of religion – notwithstanding the historical variety of religious movements and developments that were difficult to incorporate in this form. However, in more recent years, the system of religion also seems to transform away from this form. For Luhmann, recent developments make clear that religion can become something other than church religion – that it can transform into new forms. The less-organized and often also less-demanding forms of spirituality might be dealt with as one of the ways in which contemporary religion is adapting to the so-called post-secular condition (see also Taylor, 2007).

In addition, Luhmann also suggested in the secularization chapter of his *Systems Theory of Religion* that some of the aforementioned activist reactions to the perceived problem of secularization have come to constitute part of the problem itself. In this context, he focused on the potential advantages of differentiation. He put particular emphasis on the strong isolation of the system of religion in our contemporary society. In his words: the fact 'that religion is independent of the inclusions/exclusions originating in other systems . . . raises important questions for religion in modern society. The issue can hardly be recognized anymore as one of "secularization"' (Luhmann, 2012: 200). Following Luhmann, religious collectivities might nowadays be well advised to make use of their relatively isolated position, of the lack of interdependencies with other function systems



at the level of the rules for inclusion and exclusion. Religion is able to ignore near exclusion from other function systems, such as not having money, an education, an identity card or a chance of being taken seriously by the police or a judge. In some of the final sentences of this chapter, Luhmann wrote:

Although the inadequate integration of religion – both in inclusionary and exclusionary realms – results from the differentiation of other function systems, it does not somehow entail a disadvantage or even a loss of function for religion. Rather, the issue is whether and how religion can take advantage of the ensuing opportunities. (Luhmann, 2012: 220)

In this sense, religion may make use of the differentiation of the entire population into loosely coupled public roles. For Luhmann, secularization may thus also provide opportunities for religion. He believed that religion could still fulfil a specific social function – albeit as a counterculture.

## Conclusion

Both Parsons and Luhmann analysed religion in its social and cultural environments. Both Parsons and Luhmann also worked within the same sociological tradition. ‘Naturally,’ Luhmann remarked shortly after Parsons’ death, ‘we are at liberty to elaborate Parsons’ theory further and to look for applications. But at the present time it seems at least equally important to let in a bit of fresh air’ (Luhmann, 1982: 48). In retrospect, it is not difficult to see that Luhmann did more than let in a bit of fresh air. The remark is an understatement of his own contributions to this line of sociological theorizing. However, as I have tried to show, comparing Parsons’ and Luhmann’s approaches is helpful in order to elaborate further this theoretical tradition and to look for applications in the field of sociology of religion.

Parsons did not question the compatibility of religion (Christianity) with modern society. He focused instead on the survival and transformation of religion in his own nation – long before debates in sociology in general and the sociology of religion in particular would start to direct attention to what has been called ‘American exceptionalism’. He linked the ‘re-invention’ of religion in the ‘new nation’ to distinctive features of its religious and political organization. The institutionalization of inclusion ideals prompted the new nation-state to seek identity and solidarity through a more encompassing, generalized form of civil religion. The principle of voluntarism in religion constituted an advance in religion and in society – not only because it emancipated the individual from ascribed ties and ascribed belief systems, but also because it created the conditions for the rise of new, sacralized ideals of the ‘good society’ and new forms of adhering or belonging to the American nation-state. Furthermore, it should be added that Parsons believed that similar social and religious developments were taking place in other parts of the western world. He clearly did not treat the American society of his time as an exception or aberration in need of an extra explanation. He viewed it instead as having achieved the highest evolutionary stage, distinctive by virtue of its advances.

Luhmann (1982) not only remarked that Parsons’ own theory should have prevented him from viewing modern society in its American variant as superior to others; he also avoided discussing modern religion as just the continuation of what went before, as the next stage in a Parsonsian ‘process of development’. Instead the theory he developed placed emphasis on the historical and social contingency of ‘modern religion’. This theory also allowed him to point to possible alternatives – both conceptually and institutionally.

In contrast to Parsons, Luhmann put much emphasis on the differentiation of the rules for inclusion and exclusion. In Luhmann’s view, religion had been forced to reconceive itself as a consequence of the transition to functional differentiation. In several ways, this transition encouraged the mutual modeling of different function systems. The rules for inclusion and exclusion in religion were moulded after those of other systems. Just as the modern nation-states tried to encompass the social lives of the

people contained in them, and thus aimed at exclusive membership of people within them, so did western religions develop as churches that incorporated their members as believers and that expected those members to be involved in an encompassing and continuous way (see Beyer, 2012; Lechner, 1997; Vanderstraeten, 2014b). But the specification of religion in terms of church religion also led to a range of problems for this system. To tackle its inclusion problems, the churches have also tried to forge alliances with organizations in other systems (notably with organizations specializing in education, health care and politics). I have briefly discussed above some of the unintended consequences of this organized worldly activism. As Luhmann remarked, it is in more recent years that religion seems to transform away from the ‘church form’ and the accompanying membership ideals and reconceive itself in less-organized, post-secular ways.

We may conclude that the way we understand religion and religions today still owes a great deal to the way religion reconceived itself in response to the institutionalization of inclusion imperatives. Even the standard measures of religious participation or secularization, which are applied in most available historical and sociological research, are a result of the religious reactions to the institutionalization of these imperatives. In other words, our standard approaches of secularization are the outcome of a path-dependent process. Both Parsons and Luhmann have highlighted alternative ways of approaching secularization. In Luhmann’s work in particular, one finds the instruments to recognize and observe alternative forms of religion – whether in Europe or in the United States. In this sense, Luhmann’s analyses of religion and secularization aim at sociological enlightenment: they illuminate the contingency of taken-for-granted structures and point to other options.

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## Notes

1. Weber perceived the Protestant Revolution, especially in its Calvinist–Puritan version, as the start of a general reorientation of Christianity: from an other-worldly to a this-worldly direction. Religious callings were redirected to the secular, this-worldly sphere. Weber’s expressive image of the breaking of the monastery walls conveys this idea: the symbolic walls separating the religious and the secular spheres break down (Casanova, 1994: 11–39). Similarly, the young Peter Berger famously argued that Christianity had contributed to its own demise. ‘Historically speaking, Christianity has been its own gravedigger’ (Berger, 1967: 129).
2. Bellah (1970) drew attention, among other things, to the references to God in presidential inaugurals and the uses of popular expressions that invoke God (‘one nation under God,’ ‘may God bless America,’ ‘in God we trust,’ etc.). Most of these phrases do not specify whose God is meant. But do they also include everyone in the societal community? Do such expressions really ‘empower’ the entire population? Bellah himself ceased using the term in the late 1980s, frustrated by its ‘unnecessary reification’ (Bellah, 1989; see also Gardella, 2014).
3. This line of argument relies on other work from that time. Following SF Nadel, for example, ‘the anonymous public is narrowed down and differentiated in role terms . . . [The public will] assume a particular role or quasi-role, more or less enduring or sharply defined; in this sense the public of a craftsman become his “customers” or “patrons,” the public of a doctor his “patients,” and that of poets and priests, an “audience” or “congregation”’ (Nadel, 1957: 76). Related, too, is the

- distinction between the crowd and the public, introduced by RE Park (1972: 50–62). For a more detailed discussion, see Stichweh (2005).
4. Following Luhmann (1989: 149–258), persons no longer have a relatively fixed location or identity within modern society – for example, one determined by the household or clan to which they belong. What someone ‘is’, is now defined according to what they possess or earn, the rights they have acquired, their schooling, their reputation in politics, science, art, the mass media, and so on. It is defined by the combination of various inclusions and exclusions. At the level of the individual, individualization is the most obvious outcome of this differentiation and decentralization of inclusions and exclusions.
  5. Many historical examples may be cited. Protestants, for example, started to call for awakening, revival, *reveil*, *renouveau*, etc. Both Protestant and Catholic missionary organizations were established in various parts of the world. Frequent participation in celebrations of the Mass also became the object of an active ‘identity politics’. In the Catholic Church there was a clear rise of devotional practices, worships, processions and pilgrimages (such as the veneration of the Virgin Mary). In more general theoretical terms, it might be argued that religion tried to elaborate and impose its criteria or *eigenvalues*.
  6. See, for example, the analyses of the evolution of *active* congregations in the Catholic Church – that is, religious communities of men or women who devote themselves to apostolic work ‘in the world’. These congregations have aptly been called the ‘sacred militia’ of the Catholic Church. However, their work in the world also started to mould their religious way of life. The life lived by brothers and sisters behind high brick walls, in the splendid isolation of their cloisters, became clearly modelled by their worldly tasks. Just as the many duties turned the religious calling of a secular priest into a ‘one-man bureaucracy’, the members of religious congregations were/are absorbed by their work in the world (see also Vanderstraeten, 2014b).

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