

On the complex relationship between the religious and the secular – proposing the notion of sedimentation

*Terminology that describes the categories of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ as two variables in a simple zero-sum-game are not sufficient says **Karsten Lehman**. In reality, complex historical processes mean these categories are dynamic and complex. Here Lehmann looks at how the Catholic NGO Pax Romana has changed its engagement with the UN over time. He proposes the notion of ‘sedimentation’ to better understand the dynamic transformations of religions and their role in public space.*



International Movement of Catholic Student Pax Romana at the UN Economic and Social Council's Youth Forum. Image: PaxRomana

Critiquing ‘the secular’

From the beginning, the academic debates on religions in public space have had a strong focus on theory. They have long been dominated by an implicit critique of the notions of ‘the secular’ and ‘secularization’. The enduring impact of the founding contributions to this field cannot be properly understood without **José Casanova’s** or **Jürgen Habermas’** critique of the so-called ‘secularization paradigm’.

The Anglo-German trend – emphasizing the **long and contingent historic dimensions** of secularization processes – has added new momentum to those analyses. The research team ‘**Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities**’ at the University of Leipzig, for example, challenges the neutrality of the secular public sphere. And from a different angle, the predominantly English-Swiss-Scandinavian ‘**Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network**’ has repeatedly been approaching the significance of public space for the analysis of what its members characterize as nonreligion.

My recent study on ‘**Religions in International Relations**’, in particular the parts on the activities of the Roman-Catholic NGO Pax Romana, gives further impetus to these debates. **Pax Romana** is

an international umbrella organization of Roman-Catholic students and professionals. Almost 100 years old, it is among one of the most established **religiously affiliated organizations** that are formally accredited as NGOs to the United Nations' Economic and Social Council / ECOSOC.

With regards to the establishment of religion in public space, Pax Romana's work is of particular interest in as far as it is characterized by a two-step shift in its perception of the UN.

First step: UN as a secular, diplomatic space

The multi-fold materials in Pax Romana's **archives** show how central figures inside the organization based their initial UN-activities on the widely shared conviction of the mid 1940s that the United Nations were about to develop into a central stage of international diplomacy (or even politics). Accordingly, the Pax Romana-General Secretariat in Fribourg / Switzerland began almost immediately to look at how it could use the UN-context as a formal avenue to actively influence the diplomatic discussions that were taking place.

The work of Marc Dubois – at the time the President of the 'Groupe Français d'Etudes Internationales' – illustrates this point. In 1947, Dubois became the first formal representative of Pax Romana inside the UN context. His detailed reports to Pax Romana's General Secretariat are full of fascinating insights into his attempts to find partners among other Catholic NGOs and to contribute, for example, to the discussions on human rights that were about to become of central importance to Pax Romana. At the same time, the reports illustrate how Dubois perceived the UN as a fundamentally different context that he was not at all prepared to work in:

“All of this does not prevent us from making the point that the defence of Catholic Interests in the course of the second session of the Commission for Human Rights at Geneva was pure improvisation” (PaRo-FR, Box G4)

“Tout cela n'empêche nullement de constater que la défense des intérêts catholiques à la deuxième session de la Commission des Droits de l'Homme à Genève a été une pure improvisation.”

Twenty years later, however, the relationship of Pax Romana to the UN had changed considerably.

Second step: UN as a world-wide public space

The changes from 1940/50 to 1960/70 might not at first be too obvious. In 1950 the Catholic NGOs established the 'Centre d'Information Catholique des Organisations Internationales Catholiques' at Geneva that is today known as the '**International Catholic Centre, Geneva**'. In the 1960s this centre became one of Pax Romana's central links to the UN: Tadeuz Szmitkowski, its long-term Secretary General, also served from the mid 1960s up to the mid 1970s as the formal representative of Pax Romana to the United Nations in Geneva.

This development provides a perfect example for two fundamental shifts that were taking place: First, Szmitkowski's tenure with Pax Romana stands for a new approach to the work inside the UN-context. During his time with Pax Romana, the organization began to see the UN as a dimension of a world-wide public that Pax Romana was itself a part of. Second, as part of this process, Szmitkowski started to use the Centre to strengthen long-lasting cooperation between Pax Romana and non-Catholic organizations by positioning Pax Romana as a human rights agency that is part of the NGO-community (similar processes took place in New York City where the peace activist Eileen Egan became the central representative of Pax Romana in the UN-context.)

This brings us back to the systematic question of the relationship between 'the religious' and 'the secular' in the context of an increasingly substantive integration of religion in public space.

Shifts in the construction of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’

Taken together, these descriptions underline the rapid changes in the construction of the United Nations by the protagonists inside Pax Romana, as well as their reactions to those changes. Initially, the United Nations were perceived as a secular diplomatic space Pax Romana had to work in as a Catholic NGO in order to influence world politics. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, this distinction between the United Nations as a secular space and Pax Romana as a Catholic NGO lost significance. Pax Romana’s representatives began to perceive themselves as professionals that formed a part of a global public.

On the one hand, this observation very much supports the critical attitude towards simplifying readings of secularization theories dominating the classic publications on religion in public space. The analyses of Pax Romana’s activities inside the UN-context provide yet another example for the dynamism and the complexity of the processes in question. They show how the RNGOs were able to establish themselves in a newly emerging and rapidly changing context and to what extent this context affected the self-perceptions of the protagonists inside those religiously affiliated organizations.

On the other hand, the above reconstructions of Pax Romana’s relationship towards the UN point towards much more fundamental, categorical issues. They highlight the rapid changes in the constructions of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ that were at the basis of Pax Romana’s work with the UN. In about 20 years, a context that had initially been perceived as decisively secular, became an integral aspect of the self-perception of the actors involved.

More conceptually speaking, these observations indicate that a terminology that describes the categories of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ as two variables in a simple zero-sum-game are not sufficient to grasp the complexity of the respective historic processes. The example of Pax Romana’s UN-related activities rather emphasizes that these constructions are much more dynamic and complex. This raises the question of how to analytically describe such a process.

Sedimentation

The notion of ‘sedimentation’ is one I propose to better understand the dynamic transformations of religions and their role in public space. In one of the central findings developed by David Martin, Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto in the context of the [The Religion and Society Research Programme](#), the notion is **introduced** to grasp the relationship between religion and the secular:

“The approach offered here rejects the starting point that the terms ‘religion’ and ‘the secular’ are neutral concepts which can serve as unproblematic building blocks of data collection and analysis. It treats them instead as an integral part of the milieu to be analysed rather than as detached standpoints from which it can be viewed. [...] This multi-layered, sedimented situation explains why secularization theory continues to be able to explain some, but not all, of the present situation.”

Based upon the multi-fold empirical analyses of the programme in Britain, this quote highlights the long-lasting complex relationship between the constructions of the religious and the secular. Woodhead proposes that one has to take this type of relationship into consideration in order to grasp the cultural situation we are confronted with today – be it in Britain or in the context of international relations.

Unfortunately, neither Linda Woodhead nor her colleagues provide any further elaboration upon this notion of sedimentation. Of course, they are aware of the fact that one must not overstretch the geological / physical metaphor of the ‘sediment’. Socio-cultural processes must not be approached with this sort of simplifying scientific categories, they are the outcome of processes of social construction on different social levels (discussed further [here](#)).

A reference to Pierre Bourdieu's field **theory** might help to further enhance the concept of sedimentation for the study of religion. In line with the metaphor of sedimentation, Bourdieu's pragmatic approach makes it possible to outline the notion of sedimentation in a way that grasps the deep structures of existing, present-day socio-cultural fields. It thus provides an analytic background that highlights the significance of cultural developments for the analysis of 'the religious' and 'the secular'.

The reference to Bourdieu helps to enhance the discussions around the concept of sedimentation in two ways: First, it helps to identify the different actors involved in the interaction between social fields, underlining the power relations that form the basis for the construction of the borders between the religious and the political (or rather diplomatic) field. Second, it allows to integrate a more historic dimension into the analyses – a dimensions that is surprisingly weak in the publications of Bourdieu but unavoidable to better understand the cultural foundation of the present-day situation.

In this sense, the notion of sedimentation helps to open a new analytic perspective on the constructions of 'the religious' and 'the secular', and the analysis of religion in public space can serve as an experimental ground to further advance the respective terminology.

About the author



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