Modernization and Religion:
Must they Move in Opposite Directions?

Rita H. Mataragnon

Modernization and Religion: Must They Move in Opposite Directions?

RITA H. MATARAGNON

Despite differences in definitions and theories about moderniza-
tion, two generally accepted common denominators of the modern-
ization process are change and direction. How may this change and
direction be characterized? Some characteristics commonly be-
lieved to be part of this change and direction include transition
"from primitive subsistence economies to technology-intensive
industrialized economies, from closed ascriptive status systems to
open, achievement oriented systems; from extended to nuclear
kinship systems, from *religious to secular ideologies;* and so on
(italics added)."[1]

Indeed, it is often felt that modernization and religion cannot
go hand in hand, that the two must continually detract from each
other and move in opposite directions. How common it is to hear
development workers attribute a group's rejection of technology
to deep-seated religious beliefs, or to hear of super-modern in-
dividuals who equate all religion with superstition. Is there a sys-
tematic de-emphasis and deterioration of religion as a society and
its people become more modernized?

Although a distinction is properly made between modernization
(a process or the product of a process) and modernity or modern-
ism (a set of attributes), it is clear that the study of modernization

    1. Dean C. Tipps, "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A
Critical Perspective," in *Comparative Modernization,* ed. Cyril E. Black (New York: The
Free Press, 1976), p. 67.

would ultimately have to rely on the variable of modernity or modernism, which is the more tractable and measurable variable. "Changes in the proportion of people holding modern values, or changes in the extent to which individuals have gone modern constitute modernization."[2]

Indeed, one of the undisputed assumptions in modernization theory and research is that there are certain characteristics and behavior that can be identified for the modern man, i.e., a class of attributes called modernity or modernism. The question is: does this class of attributes include a decreased interest in, or even disavowal of, religion? Do individuals in a modernizing society become less religious? Does modernization necessarily move in a direction away from religion?

MODERNIZATION AND RELIGION: AMBIGUITY OF RELATIONSHIP

An investigator interested in establishing the relationship between modernization and religion soon discovers, to his surprise, a virtual absence of empirical evidence that directly relates modernization to religion or vice-versa. Furthermore, an examination of the tangential contexts in which religion is mentioned in modernization studies suggests a serious ambiguity in the relationship between modernization and religion. It appears that the problem is not just a matter of the magnitude of relationship, but the nature of the relationship.

In several studies in which the components comprising a measure of modernity are listed, religion or religiosity is cited as one component. Typically, a measure of modernity is developed through item analysis: to identify salient characteristics, items which comprise the different components are initially scored in what is *felt* to be the modern direction and correlations are then computed between each item and the total score to determine which ones are more highly related to an overall measure of modernization.[3] Although in some cases respondents are employed to judge which response constitutes the modern direction of each

2. John B. Stephenson, "Is Everyone Going Modern? A Critique and a Suggestion for Measuring Modernism," *American Journal of Sociology* 74 (1968) : 265-75.

3. David H. Smith and Alex Inkeles, "The OM Scale: A Comparative and Socio-Psychological Measure of Individual Modernity," *Sociometry* 21 (1966) : 353-77.

item, the fact remains that subjective judgment is used to determine that religious behavior is more un-modern. Since the measurement of modernity becomes its operational definition, if the items on religion are significantly correlated with the total score and the items are adopted, an inverse relation between modernity and religion becomes automatic. The original basis, however, was intuitive.

To give a flavor of religious components in some modernity or modernism scales, the following are offered as examples:

Kahl posited fourteen dimensions in which attitudes may change with modernization.[4] One of them was "low religiosity." Inkeles started with thirty-three themes which included, "religious causality" and "religious-secular orientation." Although these themes did not comprise the final salient characteristics, several of the final chosen themes could be tangentially related to religiosity—faith in science and medicine rather than fatalism, subjective efficacy or belief in man's control over the environment. Inkeles' final shortened scale of ten items included this one characteristic of the modern man: He is willing to acknowledge that a man can be good without being religious.[5] Schnaiberg included among his Modernism Items a short religiosity index in which items concerned type of marriage, frequency of prayer, and length of fasting.[6] Finally, Stephenson's culturally derived Modernism-Traditionism Scale included religion as one of the seven value areas. It must be noted that although the judgments about direction of modernism for each item were derived from indigenous judges, the seven "value areas" were determined as bases for classification prior to judging. Using a Guttman scale, Stephenson also showed that among the seven value areas religion is the next-to-the-last area to be changed, i.e., it is not so vulnerable as opinions about innovation and education.[7]

It can be readily seen that scholars and laymen alike often intuitively see an inverse relationship between modernization and reli-

4. J. A. Kahl, *The Measurement of Modernism: A Study of Values in Brazil and Mexico* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968).

5. Alex Inkeles, "Making Men Modern: On the Causes and Consequences of Individual Change in Six Developing Countries," *American Journal of Sociology* 75 (1969) : 208-25.

6. Allan Schnaiberg, "Measuring Modernism: Theoretical and Empirical Explorations," *American Journal of Sociology* 76 (1970) : 399-425.

7. Stephenson, "Going Modern," p. 265.

gion, or modernity and religiosity. This is especially evident in the tendency of many, though not all, investigators to include at least initially a component of religion or religiosity among the areas of attitudinal and value changes expected to be affected by modernization processes. It is also reflected on the part of judges in their choice of the unreligious attitude or behavior as "the more modern one." Although in some careful studies the religiosity component does not come out as a critical factor, still the fact that certain areas are chosen and not others reveals underlying assumptions and value-judgments about the end-state of modernization.

Although it would be redundant to correlate modernity with religiosity if religiosity were a subsumed component and therefore part of the definition of modernity, this state of affairs, if uniform, would at least leave no doubt about the definite (even if inverse) relationship between modernization and religion. However, the relationship is apparently more elusive than that. *First* of all, the studies which initially included religion as a component have yielded equivocal outcomes in their eventual enumeration of statistically critical or salient components. In some, religion has weak, marginal significance while in others it provides no contribution whatsoever to overall modernity.

Second, there is no explicit agreement that religion or religiosity is under the rubric of modernization or modernity rather than being an external variable which affects or is affected by modernization. A number of studies have used religion, or changes in religious values, as an intervening variable to explain or interpret the effects of modernizing structures on behavioral changes. For instance, Coombs and Freedman concluded that changes in familial and religious values mediate between urbanization and family life.[8] As Fawcett has pointed out, prominent among the themes that relate modernization processes to fertility change are the effects of changes in cultural and religious values.[9]

The shifting back and forth of religion as subsumed variable under modernity, or as an external variable to be correlated with

8. Lolagene C. Coombs and Ronald Freedman, "Some Roots of Preference: Roles, Activities and Familial Values," *Demography* 16 (1979) : 359-76.

9. James T. Fawcett and Marc H. Bornstein, "Modernization, Individual Modernity, and Fertility," in *Psychological Perspectives on Population,* ed. James T. Fawcett (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), p. 111.

modernity, partly reflects the theoretical imprecision of the modernization concept for which it has often been criticized. It is perhaps worth noting, though that religion, whether subsumed under the modernity rubric or treated as an externally correlated variable, does not seem to have the same strength, consistency and centrality other components of modernity show, such as openness to change and subjective efficacy. In fact, the latter two are never treated as external variables but always make up part of the definition.

In conclusion, the supposed inverse relation of religion to modernization can be said to be more intuitive than empirical. There is little direct evidence and little serious attention to a formal relationship between modernization and religion. References to a "relationship" are frequently assumed or inferred from other variables which are tangential to religion such as fatalism, time orientation and subjective efficacy.

MEASUREMENT PROBLEMS

Where religion/religiosity has been included as a component or external intervening variable, operational definitions and measurements of this variable have been wildly discrepant. The following are examples: In Goldberg's study, Turkish women were asked, "How often do you pray? Do you fast during Ramadan? " The same questions were asked of the women about their husbands with the addition of "How often does he go to the Mosque? " On the other hand, Mexican women were asked about themselves and their husbands: "How often do you (or does he) go to Mass? " "How often do you take Communion? " "How often do you pray outside of church? " "What type of religious instruction have you had? " "Have you ever gone to a religious school? "[10]

Consider the religiosity index of Schnaiberg, also used in a study of Turkish women, which had the following items: (1) Couple has had a civil marriage only. (2) Wife prays less than five

10. David Goldberg, *Modernism* (The Netherlands: International Statistical Institute, 1974).

times a day. (3) Wife does not fast for the entire period of Rama-
dan.[11] Another study by Bose, this time on Indian peasants, es-
tablishes a negative relationship between religious inclination and
adoption of innovation just on the basis of one item about reli-
gion: "After death the soul is not destroyed but passes on to the
next world."[12] Another single item for a whole component of
religion, found in Stephenson's Modernism-Traditionism Scale
was: "The old Bible (the King James Version) is the only true
word of God."[13] Still another study by Coombs and Freedman
on Taiwan women defined a religiosity index in terms of observ-
ance of ceremonies for ancestors.[14]

Although many investigators do not publish their question-
naires, the ones that have been published suggest an explanation
for the status of the religion/religiosity variable in modernization
research. Commonly the most traditional belief or the most con-
ventional ritual is represented. The very broad and rich concept
of religion, with its endless variations of personal beliefs and forms
of observation and participation, is tragically oversimplified. Not
only are there not enough items exploring cognitive ideas and
overt behaviors, there are virtually zero items on affect or feelings
about the supernatural and on one's relationship with the super-
natural. In general, there is a significant lack of comprehensive-
ness in the measure of religion/religiosity as a variable in modern-
ization research. Notwithstanding, data based on one or two state-
ments are often used in asserting relationship between religiosity
and modernity.

Is religion merely the observance of religious ceremonies? Is it
merely the subscription to the King James Bible as the Word of
God? Is it having a religious wedding ceremony? These are tradi-
tional expressions of religiosity and are likely to be present in indi-
viduals who came from traditional families which expect them to
toe the line with regard to basic practices. Religiosity measured
in this simplistic manner is frequently correlated with familism
(devotion and conformity to family traditions and works). Fur-
thermore, since the type of religiosity tapped involves the ob-

11. Schnaiberg, "Measuring Modernism."
12. Santi Priya Bose, "Peasant Values and Innovation in India," *American Journal of
Sociology* 67 (1962) : 552-60.
13. Stephenson, "Going Modern."
14. Coombs and Freedman, "Roots of Preference."

servance of highly traditional practices, it does not allow a fair test of personal religiosity which could take more serious forms such as "spirituality," "faith," "strength of belief," "significance of God in one's life," etc.

In this connection, it is important to point out the distinction between tradition and traditionalism. Religion is often associated with tradition. People talk of religion and tradition together or in some cases, even of religious traditions. But religion need not be traditional in its expression. "Tradition refers to the beliefs and practices handed down from the past; as we reinterpret our past, our traditions change. In contrast, traditionalism glorifies past beliefs and practices as immutable. Traditionalists see tradition as static; they urge that men do things only as they have been done before. Traditionalism, by virtue of its hostility to innovation, is clearly antithetical to the development of modernization, traditions, which are constantly subject to reinterpretation and modification, constitute no such barrier."[15]

MISPLACED POLARITIES

In an oft-cited article, Gusfield raises the point that tradition and modernity are misplaced polarities in the study of social change.[16] The same thing could be said about religion and modernity. Religion and modernity have often been implicitly treated as if they were incompatible and irreconcilable polarities which must necessarily move in opposite directions. Gusfield presented seven fallacies in the assumption of the tradition-modernity polarity. These fallacies about tradition in general can be shown to apply as well to religious tradition in particular. Although several of the fallacies presented by Gusfield overlap with each other (notably Fallacies 4, 5, 6, and 7), they will be presented one by one and applied to religion.

Fallacy 1 is that developing societies have been static societies. Quite the contrary. Religion as it is present in any culture, has not always existed in its present form. It has undergone much adjustment, assimilation, accommodation and adaptation. An imported

15. Myron Weiner, ed., *Modernization: The Dynamics of Growth* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

16. Joseph R. Gusfield, "Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change," *American Journal of Sociology* 72 (1967) : 351-62.

religion soon acquires an indigenous flavor to its beliefs and ex-
pression that makes it somewhat different from the same religion
practised in other countries. Local superstitions and cultural values
become incorporated. An indigenous religion is likewise influenced
and altered by conquests of foreign powers as well as by social, po-
litical, and cultural movements. In the same way it can be expect-
ed that modernization will continue to influence and alter religion
(and vice-versa) but not to destroy it.

Fallacy 2 is that traditional culture is a consistent body of
norms and values. In truth, however, traditional culture is just as
pluralistic as, if not more pluralistic, than modern culture. Tradi-
tion has the benefit of time, and across time norms and values
accumulate. If one chooses to be traditional, there is quite a
variety of ways by which he or she could be traditional. The dis-
tinction between popular or folk religion and the religion of the
literate elite have coexisted in many cultures, making it difficult to
characterize "the religion" in a society. Individuals who subscribe
to the same religion show wide variation with regard to their speci-
fic religious beliefs and practices. There is room in any religion for
both the traditional and the modern.

Fallacy 3 is that traditional society is a homogenous social
structure. While Weber referred to "the Protestant ethic," the spe-
cific sects who carried the ethic were by no means typical of all
Protestant groups. The Jews in Europe, the Muslims in West
Africa, the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in East Africa
are examples of groups whose marginality has proven to spur
them towards entrepreneurial achievement. Within India, the
Parsees and Tains have been potent carriers of economic innova-
tion and the development of large-scale industrial production.
Asian religions, viewed by many Westerners as an obstacle to mod-
ernization, have in many cases proven to be capable of positive
adaptation to social change.[17] What is characteristic of all these
communities, according to McClelland, "is an intense religiously
based feeling that they are superior to other people around them
and that [in] one sense or another they hold the key to salva-
tion."[18]

17. Milton Singer, "The Modernization of Religious Beliefs," in *Modernization: The
Dynamics of Growth*, ed. Myron Weiner (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 59-70.
18. David C. McClelland, "The Impulse to Modernization" in *Modernization*, ed.
Weiner, pp. 29-42.

Fallacy 4 is that old traditions are replaced by new changes. "The acceptance of a new product, a new religion, a new mode of decision-making does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the older form."[19] Paganism and Catholicism have often been accommodated together into a new form of ritualism. Many modern schools teach science and religion side by side. Interaction results in fusion and mutual penetration. Far from being replaced, religion has been the guardian of culture and civilization across the centuries. It has built schools, hospitals and community centers. It continues to be a repository of all that is best and enduring in a culture, a reflection of its *Zeitgeist* and stage of development.

Fallacy 5 is that traditional and modern forms are always in conflict. The picture of a conflicted society undergoing development or of a tormented individual choosing between traditional and modern options does not seem to hold. The "traditional" society often contains sufficient diversity of content to allow it to accept some and refuse other components of modernization. Japan is unlike the West in the ways in which "feudalism" and "industrialization" have been fused to promote growth. A collectivist orientation and commitment to emperor and family also allowed it to reject the individualism of the West. In individuals, fusion as well as compartmentalization allow a sane adjustment to modernization. Modern forms of communication and transportation allow him better access to religious activities. Role inconsistencies are tolerated by compartmentalization. In the words of the famous informant who told the British anthropologist, "When I put on my shirt and go to the factory I put off my caste."[20] Inkeles and Smith's study on personal adjustment of urban and rural dwellers in each instance compare favorably on psychosomatic symptoms with control samples of the rural population. The notion of psychic stress in urban life is probably due not so much to an incorrect view of city life as to a mistaken image of relative security and emotional support in traditional village life.[21]

19. Gusfield, "Tradition and Modernity," p. 354.
20. Singer, "Modernization of Religious Beliefs," p. 68.
21. Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, Personal Adjustment and Modernization," in *Response to Change: Society, Culture and Personality*, ed. George De Vos (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1976), pp. 214-33.

Fallacy 6 is that tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive systems. Religion ranks with the extended family as the institution most often identified as both an obstacle to economic development and a victim of the same class. As has been pointed out under *Measurement Problems,* this is because religion has always been operationally defined as traditional expression of religion. "Systematic evidence for this proposition is, however, much less ample than one might imagine."[22] The caste system in Indian life has been exaggerated as an impediment to economic growth through failure to consider its role in the division of labor and in caste mobility as an impetus to growth.

Fallacy 7 is that modernizing processes weaken traditions. Modernized structures, especially mass media allow the rapid dissemination and reinforcement of whatever are the predominant values of the society. People are discriminating about what are meaningful to them and what impinge on important aspects of their lives. Mass media can broadcast propaganda incessantly, but if friends and relatives preach different values, the mass media are not likely to win. "The persistence of belief in God in countries where atheist propaganda has gone on for decades is a case in point."[23]

The trickle effect of ideas from the accepted indigenous elite to the masses increases rapidly with modernization. Thus, Srinivas has contended that while higher social levels appear to be "westernizing" their life styles, lower and middle levels seek mobility by becoming more devotedly Hinduistic, following more Brahminical styles, and otherwise Sanskritizing their behavior. ". . . tradition may be changed, stretched, and modified, but a unified and nationalized society makes great use of the traditional in its search for a consensual base to political authority and economic development."[24]

Portes has in fact theorized that modernity, presumably because it leads to Western attitudes, can interfere with mobilizing the masses for national development.[25] Acquired tastes for imported jeans and imported fruits and even for imported intellectual ideas

22. Alex Inkeles, "A Model of the Modern Man: Theoretical and Methodological Issues," in *Comparative Modernization,* ed. Cyril E. Black, pp. 320-48.

23. Ithiel de Sola Pool, "Communications and Development" in *Modernization,* ed Weiner, pp. 105-18.

24. Singer, "Modernization of Religious Beliefs," p. 63.

25. A. Portes, "The Factorial Structure of Modernity: Empirical Replications and a Critique," *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (1973) : 14-44.

contribute to national debt and the brain drain rather than to national development. On the other hand, traditional structures can do the mass mobilization job better. Indirect support comes from a panel regression study which concludes that indigenous modernizing institutions such as the school register a more substantial contribution to economic development while exposure to exogenous modernizing institutions such as imported cinema actually hinders economic development. The authors argued that "the cinema impedes economic growth by transmitting and promoting Western values incompatible with the social ethos that must accompany programs of national economic development."[26] This is still another evidence that indigenous religion and modernization need not be polarized, that one can in fact be the force to the other.

CONCLUSION ABOUT THE MODERNIZATION AND RELIGION RELATIONSHIP

The choice to include religion as one component in the modernity measures, the construction of items or indicators (operational definitions) to tap religiosity, the rating of judges of the un-religious attitude or behavior as the more modern one—these are all procedures fraught with subjective judgment that perpetuate the implicit "intellectual" injunction that religion does not go with modernization. Furthermore, the subsequent lack of statistical significance, the relative weakness of religiosity compared to other predictor variables, as well as the ambiguous sliding back and forth of religiosity as either a component variable under modernity or an external factor (either antecedent, intervening or consequent) suggests that the inverse relationship between modernization and religion is more imagined than real. One is forced to conclude that there has hitherto been no systematic, clear-cut, unequivocal evidence to support the belief that modernization and religion must move in opposite directions. In fact, it could also be theorized that religious forces were responsible for the move towards moderniza-

26. Jacques Delacroix and Charles Rogin, "Modernizing Institutions, Mobilization and Third World Development: A Cross-National Study," *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978) : 123-52.

tion, and that religion as a whole has no built-in expiration date considering its dynamic capacity for change in form and in expression.

SYMBOLS AND MYTHS AMID CHANGING TIMES

Modernization is a concept that evolved in the social sciences to depict a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Compared to religion, modernization is a relative new-comer; yet it allegedly threatens to undermine religion at best, or send it on the way of the brontosaurus at worst. Equivocal empirical evidence so far does not warrant such apprehension. At this point, some perspective is needed.

People have always sought, and will always seek meaning in their lives. This impulse is in recognition of man's mortality and the need to transcend it. Each age and culture provides its own symbols and myths that form a structure of meaning from which people generate values to live by. Myths here do not refer at all to falsehoods but to lasting truths shared by a people.[27]

Whether modernization will solve more ills than those it unleashes is for future history to tell. In the meantime, however, it has to be reconciled with some of the symbols and myths that have for years provided a comfortable structure of meaning for individuals in a culture. Breakdown in cherished symbols and myths leave a people bereft of guideposts for coping and rules for living. Experimentation in different lifestyles and the flourishing of new psychotherapies may be viewed as modern attempts to discover personal meaning. Modern interpretations and expressions of religion, modern forms of religion, and even modern religions also come to the rescue.

27. Rollo May, "Psychology Today/The State of the Science," *Psychology Today* 16 (May 1982) : 56-58.