Is secularization the inevitable result of modern scientific research, technological innovation and prosperity? "Yes", according to many people in Western Europe. "No", according to the answer of Dr. Michael Amaladoss, prominent theologian from India and advisory staff member at the generalate ('headquarters') of the Jesuits in Rome.

Asked for a further explanation: "If this were the case, it would be impossible to account for the fact that in the United States, a country which after all shows all the characteristics of a modern society -- urbanized and industrialized, great social mobility, strong consumerist attitude, cradle of the mass media -- massive secularization does not occur. Church attendance, too, hardly seems to be on the decline. So it seems to be a typically (Western) European phenomenon. And even as far as Western Europe is concerned one has to be careful. According to recent research secularization -- in the sense of the elimination of everything transcendent, supernatural in people's lives and thoughts -- appears to be rooted less deeply than it was thought to be some ten years ago. The secularization boom might very well be a socio-institutional crisis rather than a religious crisis. Which does not alter the fact that as a result of it the future of Christianity as a relevant social phenomenon is at stake."

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1 On 31 January 1992 IIMO (Interuniversity Institute of Missiological and Ecumenical Research) held a seminar on "India and the Process of Secularization". The reason was twofold. Firstly, Rob van der Zwan, who is preparing a doctoral thesis on this subject, finished his three-year term as a junior researcher. Secondly, Prof. A. Camps, after ten years, handed over his chairmanship of the board of governors of IIMO. Guest-speaker at the seminar was Father Amaladoss from India. The present text is the English translation of an interview with Dr. Amaladoss, published in the Dutch daily Trouw, February 4, 1992. It is followed by his address read at the seminar.
Father Amaladoss, Jesuit, aged 55, small, of slender build, modest, soft voice, was in the Netherlands, where he was a guest speaker at an afternoon workshop of the IIMO, Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research. A logical choice, for Dr. Amaladoss advises the leadership of his order in fields such as ecumenism, dialogue with non-Christian religions, evangelization and inculturation. Originating from the state of Tamil Nadu, in South-East India, he lectured theology at Delhi, near New Delhi, and subsequently in 1983 became assistant to the Jesuit Superior General, at present the Dutch Father Kolvenbach.

What is the reason that Western Europe is going through a secularization boom and the United States are not? The two of them do belong to the same Western sphere of culture.

Amaladoss: "Since the ancient Greeks Western Europe, in contrast to other cultures, has been characterized by a rigid separation between the 'holy' and the secular, between the natural and the supernatural. Instead of the two of them being forced into a harmonious unity, as happened in Asia, European history shows how the 'sacred' time and again tried to subject the secular aspect. When eventually the aspects of the sacred and the secular became institutionalized into church and state respectively, a political-social conflict arose."

Church and state

"After the church has tried for ages to subject the secular authorities, we now see how the state is definitely throwing off this domination. In that socio-institutional process of emancipation religion is losing its role as legitimization for political and socio-cultural institutions. It is no longer the traditional system of values, dominating everything and everybody, but is increasingly being forced to the fringes of society.

In the United States on the other hand there has never been an intertwining of church and state such as in Western Europe. Separation between the realm of religion and the secular had always been an established fact there and therefore did not have to be won. Nor were the secular leaders in the U.S. forced to resist church supremacy, for it did not exist. Result: a more relaxed relationship between church and state, without the need for the kind of anti-clericalism from which many people in Western Europe are suffering.

As a result of faith having been and still being very much institutionally determined, religiosity in the U.S. rather manifests itself as a 'civil religion', as a natural aspect of society. In consequence, conflicts with the institution of the church