THE SECULAR: A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW

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N THIS ARTICLE I want to pose, briefly, four questions about the secular from a sociological view: (1) How secular is the modern world? (2) If there is a kind of 'secularization', in what does it consist? (3) Is secularity a blessing or a curse for religion? (4) What are the advantages of finding more of the sacred in the secular, in looking for secular blessings? Elsewhere, I have argued, at some length, that the secularization thesis in sociology is neither, properly, a testable theory nor even one coherent concept. People who appeal to it are at cross purposes and refer to quite different phenomena ranging from alienation, the withering away of religion, to vague feelings that religion has lost some influence at the institutional level (there is not much evidence that individuals have ceased to be religious). At present, the secularization thesis is neither proven nor provable.[1] Yet the sociological debates about the process and meaning of secularization continue unabated.[2]

How secular is the modern world?

Strong forms of the secularization thesis in the social sciences postulate that large cultural and structural factors in modernity (summative units such as urbanization, industrialization, methodical technical-rationality, radical cultural pluralism) lead to an enduring and irreversible process of religious erosion, a diminution of the quantum of the sacred as opposed to the secular. Modernity, in this thesis, following Max Weber, inexorably brings about a 'disenchantment' of the world and the steady decline of *charisma*. Oxford University sociologist, Bryan Wilson, probably the major exponent of a relatively strong form of this secularization thesis, defines the concept: 'In essence, it relates to a process of transfer of property, power, activities and both manifest and latent functions from institutions with a supernaturalist frame of reference to (often new) institutions operating according to empirical, rational,

pragmatic criteria'. As a result, 'religion has lost its presidency over other institutions'.[3]

Among sociologists of religion, Bryan Wilson, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann hold some version of the secularization thesis to be true. Robert Bellah and Andrew Greeley, on the other hand, strongly contest the thesis as a species of Enlightenment dogma (itself an unsubstantiated but firmly held belief) with little warrant in the empirical evidence. They assert that religion is an anthropological and sociological universal, functionally necessary for any well-ordered and healthy society. They assume that religion will be found universally, if not in vigorous Church life then in some functionally equivalent cultural or structural carrier of meaning, myth and transcendence. The sacred, Greeley and Bellah argue, is not so much fading away as shifting its locus (perhaps outside the mainline Churches in a kind of non-institutionalized religion or in private religion and, finally, in the eruption of new religious movements).[4] Rodney Stark has argued, persuasively, that secularization (i.e. the reduction of ever larger areas of life—asymptotically, perhaps, the reduction of the whole of modern life—to Wilson's 'the empirical, rational and pragmatic') is a self-limiting concept. Secularization continually generates countervailing sacralization responses. As Churches decline in numbers and power, new sects and cults emerge.[5]

Definitions: secular, sacred, secularism, secularity

Very clearly, some definitions are in order. By 'the secular' I mean 'regions of life that man [sic] understands and controls, not necessarily completely but for all practical purposes'.[6] These are regions toward which humans adopt a basically utilitarian attitude of mastery and control, making judgments on the basis of the technical adequacy of means to achieve stipulated goals. By 'the sacred' I mean the area of mystery—the incomprehensible, indomitable and seriously and supremely important, for 'the sacred exceeds not only our control but our comprehension'.[7] Our characteristic attitudes toward the sacred are awe, celebration, participatory contemplation and gratitude rather than mastery.

The sacred and the secular are not once-for-all fixed and completely separable domains. As Emile Durkheim reminded us, almost anything can, in principle, count as the material embodiment (the emblem) of the sacred and, similarly, through a process of desacralization return symbolically to the world of the profane.

The reverse is also true. Notoriously, transcendent and prophetic religions 'secularize' sacral claims as much as they sacralize the transcendent. All the great world religions contain theories of false and counterfeit religion.

Again, what is conventionally labelled as secular (e.g. science) may have for certain people religious significance (as, for example, science did both for Newton and Teilhard de Chardin) and vice versa. If it is of religious significance, people will define their 'secular' situation in terms of ultimate values. Politics may be either machiavellian or an instance of doing God's justice on earth. 'Secular' work can become a co-creation and a worldly 'calling'. Moreover, what is conventionally labelled as religious may have the quality of the secular. It should cause no surprise when we discover that traditional religious involvement serves merely instrumental this-worldly ends for many people.[8] They use religion in service of worldly power, status or wealth.

By 'secularism' I mean:

> the denial that a sacred order exists, the conviction that the universe is in no meaningful sense an expression or embodiment of purpose, the belief that it is unreasonable, other than anthropomorphically, to have toward the universe or its 'ground' a relationship mediated by communication or by any exchange of meanings—to have toward it a relationship in any sense personal.[9]

Secularism, like atheism, can be either intentional and explicit or practical. It can also be compartmentalized in isolated attitudes toward certain institutional sectors of society from which all religious concern is banished (e.g. the economy).

'Secularity' is a neutral term. It serves as a reference word for domains or aspects of life under direct human control or manipulation without particular regard for any sacred order. The direct relevance of a sacred order as such, or some indirect relevance to the area in question, or, finally, more direct impact of that order to other areas or aspects of life is not denied, merely bracketed for pragmatic, limited purposes. Obviously, an increase in secularity is less of a head-on threat to the sacred than an increase in secularism. Nor does secularity assume the eventual demise of the sacred. At least some transcendent religions (Christianity among them) assume radical distinctions between God and creation. They imply (and bless), thereby, a large semi-autonomous domain of the legitimately secular.

To the question, then, how secular is the modern world, we can answer, unequivocally, that 'secularism' represents a minute, and by no means growing, fraction of modern populations in Europe and North America or the third world (circa 1-3% of the total population), an isolated elite. Secularism does not represent a statistically significant factor in modernity. Indeed, most explicitly secularist ideologies (e.g. Marxism, Positivism) are in some disarray at present. Notoriously, sociological surveys uncover that the unchurched in modern societies continue to adhere to religious beliefs and practices such as prayer or belief in God. The sacred should not be equated, unilaterally, with Church membership. The latter can decline without any social diminution of the sacred as such.

Presumably, with increasingly complex societal differentiation, there is more of secularity in modernity than during earlier epochs, although, to be honest, we lack even sufficient historical evidence to be absolutely certain even on this point. But an increase in secularity need not entail a decrease in the quantum of the sacred, either absolutely or relative to the secular.

Science and the sacred

Sociologist Hans Mol points to an ideological assumption in most versions of the secularization thesis when he argues that the potential domain of science and rationality has strict limits. 'Objective observation and strict canons of rationality and scepticism appear to be dysfunctional for individual and social identity.' The signal failure of science to replace myth or religion as a sacralizing mechanism is due to 'its demonstrable incapacity to anchor a comprehensive system of meaning emotionally'.[10] Mol ridicules the arrogance and naive optimism of those who view religion as a dispensable element once science and technology have solved all of life's problems. Implicit in this view are two highly questionable assumptions: (1) that all 'problems' are of the order of technical mastery problems and that none are different-order problems of personal identity, interpretive meaning and integration into a community (these three, inexorably, raise the religious question), and (2) that human problems are finite in number such that science inevitably reduces the realm of the problematic. What if solutions to given problems by science unleash new and more complicated issues of contingency, bafflement and uncertainty? The triumph of science could actually increase the potential realm of

the sacred. The relation between the sacred and the secular need not be of a zero-sum sort.

Indeed, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that any seemingly potential conflict between science and religion may be due more to greater self-selection of scientific careers by secularists than to what happens as scientists are socialized into science as such. Moreover, the more rigorous the science (e.g. physics vs. the social sciences), the higher the percentage of religious adherents among its practitioners. Wuthnow comments,

> The proverbial conflict between religion and science may be more a function of the precariousness of science than of the precariousness of religion. Rather than religion being constantly on the run, so to speak, in the face of ever advancing scientific knowledge, scientists have had to carve out a space in which to work by dissociating themselves from the powerful claims which religion has had traditionally and which it still appears to command over the everyday life of contemporary society.[11]

In this view, secularism among some scientists is more a function of boundary-maintenance from the arena of everyday life ('the life-world') where religious claims still remain powerful than of a clear and inevitable boundary-conflict between science and religion. The very need to sustain such boundary-maintenance from everyday life actually diminishes severely the power of science to compete with religion at an emotional or mythic level. In any event, the best sociological evidence about the secularization thesis, secularism, secularity and the persistence (indeed, surprising new eruptions) of the sacred in modernity would sustain Robert Bellah's contention that 'the modern period is as pregnant with religious possibility as any other era'.[12]

If there is a sort of secularization, in what does it consist?

In an earlier cited article, I argue that we should replace the misguided and overblown secularization hypothesis of some inevitable decline of religion. Yet the hypothesis continues to gain adherents because it contains some truth. I suggest that we need to parse out five important shifts in modern religion which give the hypothesis whatever plausibility it contains. None sustain an argument that some inevitable causal forces bring about the decline of the sacred in modernity. They point to the shifting locus of the sacred more than to its diminution.

1 *An increasing pluralism in world-views and sacred canopies*

As Robert Bellah notes, in modern pluralistic societies, 'It is not that life has become a "one possibility thing" but that it has become an infinite possibility thing'.[13] In a situation of radical pluralism, doctrinal uniformity becomes more difficult for Churches to maintain. Even the extremely orthodox must now become self-consciously so. They know their orthodoxy is a self-chosen project rather than a mirror of the way things inexorably are. Peter Berger refers to this need to be self-conscious about pluralism as 'the heretical imperative'.

2 *The loss of monopoly control by the Churches over 'official' models of religion in society and even the individual religious impulse*

As Bellah states it,

> The symbolization of man's [*sic*] relation to the ultimate conditions of existence is no longer the monopoly of any groups explicitly labelled religious. However much the development of Western Christianity may have led up to and in a sense created the modern religious situation, it just as obviously is no longer in control over it.[14]

If religion has gained a new respectability in the contemporary world, it is by no means evident that the organized Churches will be the unique or, even primary recipient of the benefits. Indeed, many contemporaries assert that they are 'spiritual' but not 'religious' as a way of distinguishing their religion from that of the organized Churches.

3 *The rise of individual autonomy in religious matters*

Creeds begin to be subjected to far-reaching personal reinterpretation. It becomes more difficult for Churches to maintain inner discipline over belief. Sociologically, Catholics and Evangelicals are quite selective, in a pick and choose manner, of the authoritative dogmas they accept.[15] Selective believers do not feel their selectivity in any way diminishes their membership in the Church.

4 *The privatization of religion*

The majority of sociologists of religion accept some versions of the contention that religion has become more privatized, less a 'publicly' available value and influence in directing or shaping the megastructures of society (the state, the economy, rationalized health and education systems) which largely determines the course of modern life. However, as Roland Robertson notes, if religion

has become more private in intra-societal interactions, it has found new public salience in the emerging globalization and world-system phenomena of our time. For only a religious sensibility can relate to and define a global circumstance and relation 'as a whole'. Hence, new environmental, anti-nuclear and human rights groups and movements have strong and public religious rhetorics and motifs.[16]

5 *Greater institutional autonomy of non-religious domains*

Finally, there is general unanimity among sociologists that at least some institutional sectors of society enjoy greater institutional autonomy *vis-à-vis* religion than previously. New autonomy should not be equated with secularism or an increase in secularity *tout court*, since religion may be more important for some societal institutions than before (e.g. in the definition of ethnic or racial identities). The issue is less one of the diminution of the sacred than a shift in control, both control over the sacred and control by the sacred of other institutional sectors of society. As Bellah puts it, 'what is generally called secularization and the decline of religion would appear as the decline of the external control system of religion and the decline of "traditional" religious belief'.[17]

Is secularity a blessing or a curse for religion?

A great deal of sociological research evidence suggests that too great a dose of secularity can cause problems for organized Churches. A sociological truism runs: too great tension between Churches and their socio-cultural environment as well as too little tension spells danger to the Church. Too great tension leads, generally, to sect-like behaviour where a doctrinal purity reigns which diminishes worldly mission and relevance. Too little tension raises questions for members about what difference Church membership actually adds to general societal and cultural belonging. Established Churches such as the Church of Sweden (or the Church of England) tend to suffer membership loss—or, at the least, lukewarm commitments among members—when they become merely the cultural élite at prayer using the language of transcendence simply to affirm the cultural platitudes of the day.

Thus, secularity represents a mixed blessing for Churches. Especially in religiously pluralistic societies such as Great Britain, the United States and Canada, denominations serve a quasi-ethnic identity function, providing meaning, belonging and identity symbols which mark members off from wider secular culture.

Amidst a wide-ranging pluralism, Church membership provides an anchor of identity and clues to behaviour. The sociological evidence for the United States is quite clear that the mainline liberal Protestant Churches have been losing members for several decades because of a failure to maintain a viable Church discipline of distinctive beliefs and behaviour.[18] They seem too secular. As Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge have shown in their award-winning study of Churches-sects-cults in the United States and Western Europe, *The future of religion*, when the secularized Churches fail to maintain distinctive transcendent beliefs and behaviour, other groups move in to fill the need and void. Clearly, one reason for the success of evangelical-fundamentalist groups in the United States is their ability to maintain a clear-but-relevant boundary between Christian belief and life and the wider secular culture.[19]

Hans Mol in his research on Dutch immigrants to New Zealand found that 'the least secularized religious organizations were the most viable and retained the best hold on their immigrant member-ship'. In another research project also carried out in New Zealand, Mol found that those religious organizations most in tune with secular society proved also to be least capable of integrating the native Polynesians and white settlers into one worshipping community. By contrast, the Mormons mixed the races effortlessly, demonstrating that 'the least secularized religious organizations were the most cohesive and could (and did) act independently of secular culture'.

Mol concludes:

> These findings suggested that, if the concept of secularization were to apply at all, one would have to distinguish between cultural and institutional secularization—between the decreasing influence of religious institutions [on the wider secular society] and the tendency disposing religious institutions to become part of and like the world. Since those churches and sects whose *institutional* secularization was minimal were also the fastest growing and most viable, I suggested that *cultural* secularization seemed to conjure up its own opposite (lessening secularization) at least in some Christian churches.[20]

A Church strong in its cohesive transcendent belief and practices (such as the medieval Church) could afford to dispense multiple blessings on the secular. Absent such strength, such blessings may actually eviscerate the Church. I do not much like this conclusion

but its sociological warrants seem too well-grounded to ignore. Perhaps a more theological way of putting this is to say: while the Church must acculturate to gain a hearing for the gospel, genuine gospel preaching will unsettle firm assumptions in any culture we know. Acculturation which does not take into account the simultaneous need to evangelize every culture runs the risk of courting a secularity which will undermine it.

The advantage of secular blessings

I can think of no better way to speak of the advantages (indeed, necessity) of secular blessings than by citing a text of my Berkeley colleague, John R. Donohue S.J., in his study, *The gospel in parable*. Donohue is speaking about the realism of Jesus's preaching in parables which were drawn from nature or the common life:

> The realism of the parables, with its theological and Christological implications, affects the way the parables should be proclaimed. Often, much Christian proclamation is ineffective because it speaks a religious dialect which becomes unintelligible to many both outside and inside the community. The secularity of the parables remains a caution against placing an unnatural divorce between the Sunday morning world of religious life and the world of daily human exchange. Ultimately, nothing is purely religious or purely secular. Jesus took up in his parables the daily experiences of his hearers and let them see in these the bearers of God's presence. Preachers not only must hear the words of scripture but must hear the hearers of the Word. Paradoxically, then, in presenting the parables it is not enough simply to restate or paraphrase the parables. The vibrancy of the original images must be recaptured often in language as realistic as the original language. Even the old wine of the parables must shatter new wine skins.[21]

Donohue hastens to add that secular images drawn from common life must, nonetheless, arrest the hearer by their vividness or strangeness—drawn from everyday life but presenting a disorientation of common everydayness as well. A Church secure in its inner discipline and deep commitment to transcendence can not only afford, sociologically, to risk such secular blessing. Theologically, it is commanded by Jesus's daring proclamation of the Kingdom of God to do so. If the reference to God's transcendent Kingdom is clear, no blessing based on it can be too secular.

NOTES

[1] Coleman, John A.: 'The situation for modern faith', *Theological studies* 39 (December 1978), pp 601–632. Portions of this text are adapted from this study.

[2] For the many-sided debate on the secularization thesis in sociology cf Hammond, Philip (ed): *The sacred in a secular age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[3] Wilson, Bryan: 'Secularization: the inherited model', in Hammond: *The sacred in a secular age*, pp 11, 15.

[4] Wilson, Bryan: *Religion in secular society* (London: Watts, 1966); Berger, Peter: *Sacred canopy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967); Bellah, Robert: *Beyond belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Greeley, Andrew: *Unsecular man* (New York: Schocken, 1972); Luckmann, Thomas: *The invisible religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1968).

[5] Cf Stark, Rodney and Bainbridge, William: *The future of religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[6] Smith, Huston: 'Secularization and the sacred', in Cutler, Donald (ed): *The religious situation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), p 583.

[7] Smith: 'Secularization', p 587.

[8] For secular uses of sacred charisma cf O'Dea, Thomas: *The sociology of religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p 90ff.

[9] Swanson, Guy E.: 'Modern secularity', in Cutler: *The religious situation*, pp 803–4.

[10] Mol, Hans: *Identity and the sacred* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p 126.

[11] Wuthnow, Robert: 'Science and the sacred', in Hammond: *The sacred in a secular age*, p 199.

[12] Bellah: *Beyond belief*, p 42.

[13] Bellah: *Beyond belief*, p 40.

[14] Bellah: *Beyond belief*, p 43.

[15] For pick and choose acceptance of beliefs among Catholics cf Greeley, Andrew et al.: *Catholic schools in a declining Church* (Kansas City: Sheed and McAndrews, 1976). For the same phenomenon among American Evangelicals cf Hunter, James Davidson: *Evangelicalism: the coming generation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[16] Robertson, Roland: 'The sacred and the world system', in Hammond: *The sacred in a secular age*, pp 347–358.

[17] Bellah: *Beyond belief*, p 227.

[18] For the evidence of liberal religious decline cf Roof, Wade Clark and McKinney, William: *Mainline religion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

[19] cf Kelley, Dean: *Why conservative Churches are growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), and Hoge, Dean and Roozen, David: *Understanding Church growth and decline* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

[20] Mol, Hans: 'New perspectives from cross-cultural studies', in Hammond: *The sacred in a secular age*, p 93.

[21] Donohue, John R., S.J.: *The gospel in parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp 14–15.