

Secularization: the fate of faith in modern society

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It is a commonplace that western society – and other parts of the world influenced by the west – is secular society. Many people routinely assume that modern society tends to squeeze out religion. In fact, some think religion is so irrelevant that it could never again have the influence on society that it is once said to have had. Modernity sounds religion's death-knell. Both in popular speech and in more academic discourse such assumptions hold sway. But much confusion reigns as soon as one attempts to unpack these taken-for-granted ideas. Yet the effort is worth while, for much hangs on an understanding of secularization. The term points to a crucially significant aspect of our social context in the so-called advanced societies.

This essay focuses on the debate over secularization as it has appeared in the literature of the past twenty years. We shall comment first upon attempts to clarify the meanings of the term. Then, as some of the sociological disputes have their origin in the theological statement, we shall take a specific look at the 'theology' of seculariza-

tion. Needless to say, the implications of this topic for theology are tremendous. Thirdly, we describe what I call the 'strong secularization thesis', the idea that religion declines with the onset of modernity, and then consider the various forms that criticism of the 'strong thesis' have taken. We conclude by tracing some 'new directions' in secularization studies. My emphasis falls mainly on the social analysis of secularization, but part of my message is that *theological* understanding tends to be embedded in sociological explanation.

Clarifying the concept

There is little doubt that Larry Shiner's article 'The concept of secularization in empirical research'¹ is the best-known attempt to unravel and disentangle secularization's diverse threads. He argues that five different meanings of the term may be distinguished. They are as follows. First, secularization may be defined as 'the decline of religion'. 'The previously accepted symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and influence'. On this argument, one would end up with a religionless society. The difficulties with this definition are twofold: when was society *really* religious anyway and, how does one measure such a decline? The second

definition of secularization is 'conformity with this world'. In this case attention is said to turn from the supernatural and towards an exclusive concern with 'this world'. Eventually, the 'pragmatic tasks of the present' would become paramount and religion would cease to have any distinguishing identity. Again, the problem with this, says Shiner, is the ambiguity involved in measuring such secularization. Are not theological definitions intruding into social science? Who is to say that concern for this world is not the authentic culmination of faith?

A third, more specific understanding of secularization is the 'disengagement of society from religion'. Society increasingly distances itself from religion, especially in political life, but also in spheres such as education and welfare. Religion is relegated to the private domain, having no effect on public life. Take, for example, Luther's doctrine of the calling. He argued that all, not only priests, work in 'callings'. Does this apparent demotion of priests to the level of everyman count as an instance of secularization? Talcott Parsons, who prefers the term 'differentiation' to 'disengagement', thinks not. Rather, secular life is being endowed with religious legitimation. That is, the opposite of secularization is occurring. Clearly, secularization is more subtle than it appears at first sight.

'The transposition of religious belief and institutions' is Shiner's fourth definition. Obvious examples of this include seeing a Marxist revolutionary vision as a 'secular transposition' of Jewish-Christian eschatology. 'Obvious' it may be to some, but this example highlights the main difficulties of secularization as transposition. How does one prove that some functional parallels are really related to one another in a causal fashion? Shiner is confident that he has sniffed out another illegitimate theological assumption here.

Shiner's fifth definition of secularization is 'the desecralization of the world'. He takes as his key example the work of Max Weber, who argued that the increasing rationalization characteristic of modern society spelled its 'disenchantment'. (*Entzauberung*)² The gradual loss of a sense of the sacred (as Mircea Eliade puts it)³ is closely related to the matter-of-fact approach to the world associated especially with the rise of modern science. Of course, one immediately has to make qualifications about this definition. For instance, was it not the very desecralizing tendencies within Protestantism (in asserting that nature is not itself infused with magic or mystery) which helped foster the early development of modern science?⁴ Of these five definitions, Shiner says (and I largely agree) that the ideas of disengagement, disenchantment, and transposition are the most helpful. They are complementary to one another, and also have the advantage of referring to society in general not just the church. Although the two are connected, it makes sense to distinguish secularization of society from the inner secularization of the churches.

Several notable attempts have been made by others to refine the definition(s) of secularization. Mention might be made of David Martin's *The Religious and the*

Secular,⁵ Peter Glasner's *The Sociology of Secularization*⁶ and Karel Dobbelaer's *Secularization: a Multi-dimensional Concept*.⁷ Martin alerted us to the use of secularization by 'counter-religious ideologies'. The term has been wielded as a weapon in a war against religion on more than one occasion. This raises again the question of how 'neutral' the word can ever be. Exploring such issues is of perennial importance for social science. Peter Glasner's contribution takes Martin's suggestion somewhat further, showing that secularization may have the status of a 'social myth' by which people come to understand the world. (This theme is echoed in a slightly different way by the more recent book by Harry Ausmus, *The Polite Escape*.⁸) Glasner's demolition work is more useful than his constructive efforts, however, and his book ends in what, for many, is a blind alley. He says that we cannot comment, sociologically, on the effects of the *social* process of secularization on religious vitality today.

This situation is redeemed to some extent by Dobbelaere, whose teasing out of the 'dimensions' of secularization is not dissimilar from Shiner's. Dobbelaere places together 'disengagement, desacralization and transposition' and refers to them collectively as 'laicization'. So society becomes progressively split-off from religion, and as this happens, 'secular' functions of religion are taken over by society. Thus a process of 'disenchantment' (or desecralization) spells an ever-increasing social reliance on technology and calculation. Dobbelaere proposes further refinement by distinguishing between other dimensions of secularization; namely 'religious involvement' and 'religious change'. The former (roughly parallel with Shiner's 'decline of religion' or 'dechristianization') focuses on the extent to which people really take seriously and live out the beliefs, morals, and so on, of religious groups. The latter (roughly paralleling 'conformity with this world') expresses changes occurring in the posture of religious organisations. For a current example, many churches are moving from unconcern to awareness or involvement over issues such as the world rich-poor gap, or the nuclear debate.

What then are we left with, by way of a definition of 'secularization'? Patently, we are left with problems, especially those relating to the interpretation of history, and the nature of 'religion'. There is also the issue of social scientific 'neutrality'. Then there are clearly several distinguishable dimensions of secularization, so single, blanket definitions are unobtainable. That secularization acts as a bridging concept between religion and society is true, but does not take us very far. That it might have to do with 'temporality' (as recently suggested by Richard Fenn⁹) takes us further, but still leaves loose ends.

In Fenn's view, secularization could be thought of as the process in which greater concern with the 'passing age' is evidenced. There are several gains to make from this, some of which carry us another step further than where Dobbelaere leaves us. For example, 'conformity with the world' still leaves open the question of what is the 'world'? From a Christian perspective, an ambiguity lurks here. Concern with the world as 'created order' is

mandatory, but when such a concern lacks a transcendent dimension – that is, failing to see it as *God's* world – it is a seductive concern, to be resisted.

Enough of the definitional problem for the present. The concept of secularization on its own explains nothing. The term is a 'problematic', in Philip Abrams' sense of 'a rudimentary organisation of a field of phenomena which yields problems for investigation'.¹⁰ The agenda for investigation is, I believe, clarified by the work of Shiner, Martin, Dobbelaere and Fenn, but the issues raised by them and others are by no means dead. They emerge especially in the work of Bryan Wilson, to which we turn in a moment. Before that, however, we must note one other muddying of the waters achieved by the 'theology of secularization'.

The theology of secularization

Rather like the sociological debate, the theological debate over secularization appears at first glance to be passé, out of fashion. But the similarity continues, in that the assumptions surrounding the debate are still invoked, implicitly or explicitly, nearly quarter of a century after the debates began. Although the most spectacular moments for secular theology were probably the publication of John Robinson's *Honest to God* and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*,¹¹ it could well be argued that books like Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God* and some productions of the liberation theology school follow the same trail.¹² Each of these, in their way represents an attempt to come to terms with modernity, with the social conditions of the mid- and later twentieth century. Perceiving the possible benefits of some aspects of secularization, they try to recast Christianity in this mould. Even secularism may become, in this view, a truly Christian option.

It must be quickly conceded that, at base, some of this secular theology had a good point. Friedrich Gogarten, for instance, argues that secularization in the sense of humans taking responsibility for the world (rather than just being in bondage to it) is the goal of the biblical tradition.¹³ There was a 'secularizing tendency' within the Puritanism which insisted that nature is not imbued with magical forces. But it is clear that Gogarten and friends wished to travel a very different road from the Puritans!

In 'taking responsibility' for life, human beings were frequently said to be 'coming of age'. Possessing the technological means to control nature seemed to mean that an older reference to the transcendent God of traditional religion could happily be jettisoned. *Homo religiosus* was dead. He died when he realised that prayer would not mend the spindle or repair the computer. Many secular theologians took the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as their starting point. He it was who had popularised the phrase 'religionless Christianity'¹⁴. His objection was to various aspects of Christian 'religion' which seemed to him (and to most Christians, one would imagine) inimical to Christianity. In particular, he singles out individualism, the concern with the metaphysical, the putting of religion in a separated 'compartment' of life,

and the idea of a God who steps in to rescue, rather than always being at the centre of life. But Bonhoeffer wished to assert that *no* religion of any sort need be involved in Christianity. As Leon Morris points out in his sensible evangelical critique of 'religionless Christianity', however much his admirers wish to deny that Bonhoeffer meant what he said at certain points, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that what begins as a useful attack on Christian deficiency ends as a repudiation of some basic Christian truths.¹⁵

Hence it comes as no surprise that Robinson, who frequently refers to Bonhoeffer, takes religionless Christianity to what many felt to be an atheistic conclusion. Robinson mistook Paul Tillich and Bonhoeffer to be saying more or less the same thing, which was that 'secular man' has no need of God, as traditionally conceived, and that Christianity must adapt itself accordingly. To use our earlier terminology, Robinson was trying to hasten 'religious change'. Such secularization was desirable, as far as Robinson was concerned.

But secularization was also seen in a rosy hue by Harvey Cox, who wrote in praise of *The Secular City*. He began in much more sociological vein than Robinson: 'The rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era . . .'.¹⁶ But Cox and Robinson shared the same mentor, Bonhoeffer. Only for Cox, 'man comes of age' in the 'secular metropolis'. He takes 'secular' to mean 'temporality', but rather than seeing this in terms of the difficulties it raises, as Fenn does, Cox applauds it. Religion has been outgrown: 'Secularization is man turning his attention away from the worlds beyond and towards this world and this time'.¹⁷ Cox discerns a (progressive?) shift through history, first through 'tribal' and then through 'town' stages. He announces the arrival of a third stage, 'technopolis', and devotes the book to an examination of this theme. Of course, the processes of urbanization and secularization are closely linked together, although the nature of the relationship is a matter for debate and empirical study.¹⁸

In a sense, as I suggested, there is a connection between a Robinson and a Cupitt; between Cox and some liberation theology. On the one hand there is the idea that in a scientific world there is no room for a 'traditional' image of a creating and providential God. On the other, and partly as its mirror image, is the view that the world is very much in human hands. Although this is not by any means the theme of all liberation theology, the notion that we take matters into our own hands – the self-liberation of the poor for instance – echoes the tones of Cox's secular theology. It comes as little surprise then, when an Edward Norman launches a critical campaign against what he sees as the 'politicization' of faith, or when James Childress and David Harned ask 'Is secularization really as hospitable to Christian faith as Christian faith seems hospitable to secularization?'¹⁹

Of course, the answers to such critiques and queries must be ambiguous. Aspects of secularization, as we have seen, are important for the survival of authentic Christianity. Others may be inimical to it. Again,

political awareness and responsibility are an aspect of New Testament Christian discipleship; *exclusive* concern with the temporal, the political, is the denial of discipleship. Peter Berger put his finger on an important point when he described the 1960s trends as the *product* of secularization; this was the 'secularization of theology'.²⁰ That is, theological development clearly does not take place in a social vacuum. Rather, said Berger, secular theology has to be seen against the backdrop of wider social processes such as the decline of Christendom, the competition offered to Christian faith by 'imported' alternatives from other cultures, increased geographical and social movement, and the pervasive influence of the mass media.

Berger is here engaging in one of his favourite sports; 'relativizing the relativizers'. For if the vogueish theologians' declarations of the redundancy of religion could be seen as being in part a reflection of their peculiar historical-social milieu, then in time their declarations might themselves prove redundant. Of course, this could also be seen as a tail-chasing exercise, but it does highlight a crucial issue: is secularization primarily an intellectual or a social process – or both? If intellectual, then the mere 'history-of-ideas' approach is sufficient, if social, then presumably a discipline like sociology should be able to grapple successfully with it.²¹

Christian apologetes, raised within a western mindset, have often operated as if the intellectual problem is the key. The defence of the faith may be seen in exclusively cognitive terms. For all his fine contributions, a person like Francis Schaeffer²² sometimes leaves the impression that social changes tend always to follow intellectual ones rather than *vice versa*.²³ But the study of secularization has given fresh impetus to those who long suspected that *social* factors might be rather significant. For example, it provides a leading motif to the work of two authors who tried in the 1970s to initiate a dialogue between theology and sociology: Robin Gill and Gregory Baum.²⁴ Gill, an Anglican, argued in *The Social Context of Theology*, that effective Christian communication with the 'outside world' is severely hampered without some grasp of the social dimension of secularization. Baum, a Catholic, similarly uses the debate over secularization as a bridge for discussing the interaction between theology and society. In more popular vein, Os Guinness has articulated for an evangelical audience another version of the same conviction. In *The Gravedigger File*²⁵ he warns against the social subversion (and unwitting churchly-collusion in this) of Christianity.

All this returns us to where we began, the *social analysis* of secularization. For all the optimism of the secular theologians, can Christianity really survive in a secular society? This is the issue addressed in the 'strong secularization thesis' encapsulated in the writings of Oxford sociologist Bryan Wilson.

The strong secularization thesis

The strong secularization thesis is that the modern world pushes traditional religion to the margins of society, leav-

ing it no role to play at the centre of social life. It is a process, says Bryan Wilson, 'by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness, lose their social significance'.²⁶ (He has stuck with more or less this definition since his mid-sixties' work: *Religion in secular society*.²⁷ A calculating rationality, concerned for the best means rather than the best ends, has corroded old beliefs and morality, not just in an intellectual sense, but by becoming the very basis of society. Who now needs a religious legitimation of the power of the state, when democracy is the order of the day? And who needs personal morality when 'electronic eyes and data-retrieval systems have largely supplanted interpersonal concern and the deeply implanted virtues of honesty, industry, goodwill, responsibility and so on'?)²⁸

This strong thesis is derived above all from the work of Max Weber, on 'rationalization'. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*²⁹ he tried to show not only how Puritanism had an indirect connection with early capitalism, but also how the values embodied in that Puritanism became submerged in the process of capitalist development. The 'fate of the times', he lamented, is to live in a society characterised by 'mechanized petrification'. Weber gave us the image of a rationalized society as an 'iron cage' to picture what the spread of science, bureaucracy, and capitalism was doing to people in the modern world. Weber also agonised over the encroachment of 'rationalization and disenchantment' in a speech to students in 1918. One aspect of this can be traced to the rapid rise of double-entry accounting in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Numbers and quantitative thinking displaced qualitative, aesthetic and moral values according to Weber. As he said 'precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life . . .'.³⁰ He saw little hope of their revival.

Wilson catches Weber's wistfulness. He clearly regrets the passing of a kind of society in which the 'salt of the earth' is still able to 'sustain the social order'. But equally clearly, he believes that such a society is virtually irretrievable.³¹ The cityscape of an earlier era *does* teach us something about the dominance of religion, in the soaring spires which cast their shadow over home-and-workplace. Not that this necessarily means that all *believed*. Rather, religion was socially significant in a deep way. Nor does Wilson ignore massive regional variation in the modern societies once touched by Christianity. The indicators may be different from place to place, and the pace may be sudden or slow.³²

But however it has happened, according to Wilson, something he calls 'societalization' has occurred. Communities, as local, persisting, face-to-face groups, have fragmented or disappeared. Human life is lived in a *societal* (especially the nation-state) context rather than communally. As religion had its strength in the local group, decline in the latter means decline in the former. Whereas once upon a time the processes of production, consumption, co-ordination, control, and knowledge (possession and dissemination) were under religious direction, now this is patently not the case. Religion is consigned to socially irrelevant private spaces, away from where 'real' life is lived. Thus for Wilson, loss of

community is loss of religion. Local points of reference are no longer germane, he insists, in industrial society.

Wilson sees religion in terms of its contribution to social morality. Hence his stress on factors like the quest for personal gain as the symbol of what dominates modern life. We now live in a technical, not a moral order. The transmission of moral values to each succeeding generation is rendered obsolete in the transitory world of commuting, migrating, and the separation of home and work. The emphasis is on individual liberty to do one's own thing, the only checks on which are (rationally negotiated) laws. What with natural explanations of events, technical control of everyday life (traffic lights to conveyor belts), and with existence geared to individual advantage, no space is left for any conception of ultimate salvation. Nor is there any guarantee of social cohesion and continuity (and it is this which seems to be the bigger worry for Wilson). Even those revivals of traditional religion, or the flowering of new religious movements, are powerless in the face of societalization and secularization. What is left is religion reduced to a residual remnant, a reminder of a world we have lost.

Needless to say, there are other versions of a 'strong secularization thesis'. Early sociologist Emile Durkheim believed that religion declined in social significance in industrial society. The separating out of different spheres of life rendered religion less able to maintain its overarching legitimacy.³³ Durkheim, however, saw new social forms of religion emerging within industrial society, a possibility about which Wilson is less than convinced. Wilson prefers to think of religion in more conventional terms. Karl Marx was another who perceived the demise of traditional religion. The secularizing effects of the progression of capitalism had, he believed, 'drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy waters of egoistic calculation'.³⁴ Although debate continues on Marx's own stance towards religion,³⁵ his followers have done much to promote the impression that secularization should be seen as a positive policy strategy, as well as a feature of the modern world.

I shall limit myself to brief comment on two contemporary secularization theorists who also follow a fairly 'strong' thesis, but from very different standpoints. Vernon Pratt, in his *Religion and Secularization*³⁶ is sure that religion has had its day, and that this is no bad thing. Modern people have 'lost a concept of the supernatural' and, in a scientific milieu, such loss is permanent. He discusses sociologists, theologians, and philosophers to make a case for what might be called a 'secularist' interpretation of secularization. It amounts to secularization with no regret.

Sabino Acquaviva sticks more closely to empirical evidence about church-related activity (mainly) in continental Europe in his *The decline of the sacred in industrial society*.³⁷ He accepts that industrialisation does bring about a crisis of faith, from which there appears to be precious little exemption. As he sadly concludes, 'From the religious point of view, humanity has entered a long night that will become darker and darker with the

passing of the generations, and of which no end can yet be seen. It is a night in which there seems to be no place for a conception of God, or for a sense of the sacred, and ancient ways of giving significance to our own existence, of confronting life and death, are becoming increasingly untenable'.³⁸ This is secularization with regrets.

A third theorist who deserves mention at this point is Peter Berger. His immensely stimulating studies of religion and secularization have served to orient a generation of students in the sociology of religion. He sees secularization as a product of modernization³⁹ and thus as a process which affects people in contemporarily industrializing societies in similar ways to those which are already 'advanced'.⁴⁰ But Berger cannot neatly be slotted into the strong thesis camp, not least because his view of secularization has been changing over the last decade.⁴¹ His view is in fact softening to the point at which he is drawing attention not only to the 'crisis of religion' in the modern world, but also to the 'crisis of secularity'.

We can see that the strong secularization thesis may be held both by those sympathetic to religion and by those who for some reason may wish to hasten the decline of religion or some aspect of it. It is generally stated in terms of the *disengagement* of religion and society, and of *desacralization* or *disenchantment*, the supposed concomitant of rationalization. The fragmentation of society into different spheres as industrialism expands accounts for the former, while the rise of science, capitalism, and a rational-calculating approach to life is the social background to the latter. The process of secularization, according to the 'strong' theorists, seems to lead only in one direction, and in an apparently irreversible fashion. Without for a moment wishing to cast doubt on the notion that the social setting of industrial capitalism (in its state and its market form) *does* make a difference to the way that religion may be practised, we now must turn to an examination of some of the main forms of criticism which may be brought against the strong thesis.

Criticising the strong thesis

The main trouble with the strong thesis is that it is too simple. Its strength is in fact its weakness. The view that in time past people were somehow more religious, and that modernity systematically rots religion, is spurious. In what follows we shall only give the flavour of the discussion, and direct the reader to some relevant sources.

Probably the most devastating critique comes from anthropologist Mary Douglas, who berates students of religion for having their eyes 'glued to those conditions of modern life identified by Max Weber as antipathetic to religion'.⁴² Mary Douglas herself works out of a predominantly Durkheimian tradition which, it must be said, frequently seems to explain (away?) religious belief in terms of its supposed social function.⁴³ However, Douglas targets a key assumption which appears false to her. She fears that too many theorists have assumed that religion is 'good for you' (even if it is not in some sense

'true'). Definitions of religion laden with good values reflect this, and since modernization is bad for religion, we are in an unprecedented cultural crisis.⁴⁴ Douglas is unhappy with such bias towards the assumed 'goodness' of 'religion' on several counts, but most generally because blanket definitions obscure rather than clarify both what religion does for people (integrate them into society?) and what religion most people actually hold (superstition, luck?).

The most celebrated version of the latter objection, that the definition of religion is too narrow, comes from Thomas Luckmann.⁴⁵ Conventional religion may well have receded from the centre of modern life, but are there not new social forms of religion which have taken over some of the traditional functions of religion? Such 'invisible religions' could be seen in today's family-centredness, sexuality, or individualism. Christian authors, writing more popularly, have come right out and argued that we are really talking about modern forms of idolatry.⁴⁶ The gradual collapse of Christendom is an undisputed historical fact, they would say, but it is a mistake to confuse this with the decline of religion as such. Christian instincts may favour this approach, certainly over against that which suggests that humans may be somehow quite devoid of religious inclination.⁴⁷ It also makes mandatory what Douglas calls for, namely an evaluation of the different claims and effects of different religions: they are not all the same. Biblically distinctions are often made between sham religions and pure ones. But at the same time it must be said that for the purposes of discussing secularization as *disengagement*, a more conventional institutional definition is required. Above all, this criticism shows that it is imperative to be clear about what is included under the 'religion' rubric.⁴⁸

So secularization has been a Procrustean bed. A sociological theory has been imposed on historical data in a very contrived fashion. For example, many (who should know better) have fallen into the trap of imagining that once-upon-a-time society was 'really' religious.⁴⁹ Such a moment is taken to be the baseline from which secularization begins. Most secularization theorists have to concede that they are referring to a time when ecclesiastical and political power were closely linked.⁵⁰ This could then in fact be seen as a distortion of Christian faith (whose 'kingdom is not of this world') thus putting this kind of secularization in a more favourable light.

The related idea that moderns are utterly different from everyone else because of modernization is also attacked by Mary Douglas. This, she says, is a case of tribal myopia. Have science, technology and bureaucracy really 'quenched the sources of religious feeling and undermined religious authority'? Douglas doubts it. The marvels of modern science are at least as awe-inspiring as discoveries of a previous era. And the vast impersonal bureaucratic machine may indeed provoke crises of identity, but are such not the very stuff of the religious quest, since time immemorial? She wishes to show that many 'primitive' groups are and have been just as 'secular' as moderns; secularity is not a phenomenon peculiar to the post-Victorian epoch.

The historical issue has several other dimensions. Secularization studies have in the past ridden roughshod over historical specifics in different societies. David Martin is the champion of historical carefulness at this point. His *General Theory of Secularization* examines the variety of patterns which secularization takes in different settings. He shows how the situation in the USA is quite different from, say, Scandinavia, because of the different church-state relations obtaining before modernization. It comes as little surprise to him that Sweden, which still has a state church, should in fact have very low attendance, whereas the opposite situation is found in the USA. In fact, too many secularization theorists have been naive with regard to historical data. The welcome publication of specific historical studies can only benefit attempts to theorise secularization. One major advantage conferred by such studies is that the role of human action is brought more clearly into the scene than in many standard sociologies of secularization (which tended to be weighted towards 'the massive social force' view).⁵¹ The result of a proper integration of history and sociology of secularization should be that notions of secularization being irreversibly one-directional are jettisoned. History is much messier; the tide of secularization ebbs and flows.

This leads to another criticism of the strong secularization thesis, which is that it fails properly to account for evidence which seems to call the theory in question. The so-called new religious movements which have blossomed since the mid-century, for example, even if they have no direct effect on the running of society, can scarcely be written off as being of no religious significance.⁵² The resurgence of traditional Christian religion (especially Evangelicalism in the USA, but also its persistence in the UK⁵³) is as yet unarticulated within a modest secularization theory. This would not necessarily have to go to the lengths of Andrew Greeley's blunderbuss defence of *Unsecular Man*.⁵⁴ Rather, what is required is a sober assessment of what is actually happening in the contemporary world, without special pleading either on behalf of religious persistence or decline.

Secularization as a concept is unlikely to be abandoned because of the various criticisms just mentioned. The strong, or perhaps simplistic, version of secularization, though taken for granted by some, is used only with great caution by others. As a problematic, it still serves the useful purpose of alerting us to a cluster of issues which deserve serious investigation in our day, issues at the crossroads between religion and society. The process of rethinking secularization⁵⁵ should yield positive benefits for clarification of the present religious situation in societies which *do* evidence 'disengagement' and 'rationalization'. But it is appropriate to conclude with a few observations on possible new directions discernible in current research.

New directions in secularization studies

An obvious implication of the critique of the strong secularization story is that more care must be taken to ensure that the 'fit' between the 'facts' and the 'theory' is

good. The confident assumption (whether coming from 'theologians' or 'sociologists') that we are entering a 'religionless society' will not stand up. So theory requires modification, in the light of rigorously sifted data. But that data, which gives us the empirical constraint required, still needs a theory to hold them together.

Specific studies, such as some of those already mentioned, help fill out the picture of religion-in-society. One might also refer, as an example, to Hugh McLeod's recent work on *Religion and the People of Western Europe*.⁵⁶ He has paid special attention to religion among the working classes. Investigations like these can eventually lead to new insights into the secularization process. For instance, it has often been argued that there is a basic incompatibility between the work of David Martin and Bryan Wilson. The latter suggests that religion was once socially dominant, whereas the former maintains that there has always been a strong and widespread rejection of official religion in favour of folk or common religion and superstition in Europe. Bryan Turner now proposes that each is right, in a limited way, but they are focusing on different class levels. A social elite may well at times use religion to legitimate their position, but that does not mean that those in more lowly social echelons are in any strong sense affected by the supposedly dominant religion.⁵⁷

In fact, the whole question of where authority resides in modern societies is an important one for secularization studies. Richard Fenn has followed a significant trail in examining the way in which the courtroom may become the place of 'ultimate authority', sometimes overruling that of sincere religious conviction. (One of his most interesting examples is of a Catholic woman whose wish to have her life-support machine switched off was discounted by the court.)⁵⁸ Scientific authority is another area of interest, and again I shall refer readers to just one fascinating study. Eileen Barker has shown how, despite the diversity of theological persuasion, persons involved in cosmological debates (over 'origins') all appeal to *scientific* authority to make their case.⁵⁹ It seems to me that important work could be done in relating the current growth and diffusion of information technology to secularization. Is it possible, for example, that we are further abandoning the authority of properly formed human judgment in favour of mere 'calculation'?⁶⁰ Or will computers be treated only as *aids* to decision-making, rather than as somehow possessing that capacity?

Another new direction, if it may be so termed, is to find clues about secularization outside of the sociology of religion. Following the work of Michel Foucault, for example, it has been proposed that in the secularization process, various forms of moral restraint, ascetism, and so on, are replaced by secular practices such as dietary control.⁶¹ Again, increased concern with cultural symbols also enhances our understanding of how phenomena - such as rock music - may be symptomatic of a secularizing tendency.⁶² (Moves like this also serve to help put religion back on the sociological map after what some might have interpreted as the disciplinary suicide of being obsessed with a concept (secularization) which

seemed to bid farewell to the subject-matter of the sociology of religion!)

The theological response to secularization must clearly become more sophisticated than that exhibited in the excesses of the 1960s secular theology fad. To talk in bland blanket terms about 'secular society' is not on. Thankfully, some hopeful signs are emerging, which demonstrate an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of 'secularization'.⁶³ For instance, the secularization of thought, regretfully documented by various Christian commentators, ought not to be confused (though the connections should be displayed) with social secularization or 'disengagement'. An aspect of the secularization of thought is what is often called the 'loss of a Christian mind'. From a Christian viewpoint this is properly deplorable, in a way that, for example, the prising apart of Church and State is not. The latter may not be such a bad thing for the church which now has to find its feet in a situation of greater cultural confrontation, rather than enjoying the dubious privilege of state support. In such a context certain New Testament passages about Christian 'citizenship' take on a fresh significance!

One last note. I am in no way implying that careful empirical study will sort out all the problems connected with this slippery secularization concept. Indeed, I see no way in which 'theological' assumptions can finally be eradicated from definitions of religion and secularization. The point is to be clear as to what we do *mean*, and as to what the implications of this view seem to be. For historical sociology (which is where secularization concepts are properly located and assessed) is ever a matter of *rhetoric*.⁶⁴ That is, we are engaged in the task of constructing an argument, in this case, to explain some of the relationships between religion and society, by using a suitably qualified concept. Theology may actually contribute insights to this argument, for instance as we test out whether the biblically-derived notion of 'temporality' is illuminating for secularization studies. There is no excuse for allowing secularization studies themselves to become a secular pursuit by default.

So does 'secularization' tell us anything about the 'fate of faith in the modern world'? The answer I have given is yes, in a limited way it helpfully alerts us to some significant dimensions of the religion-and-society problem. It raises some important questions, rather than explaining anything as such. It indicates some connections between modern life and religious practice, although in itself it tells us little about related notions such as 'pluralism', the retreat of religion to the private sphere, or the rise of 'surrogate religions'.

But the concept of secularization is inevitably bound up with questions which no sociology can resolve on its own. For they are also theological questions, in the sense that one's understanding of 'religion' or of 'historical interpretation' is reflected in the kind of secularization theory produced. So the onus is on those who care about relating social science to a Christian world-view (as distinct from some other) to enter the socio-theological dialogue in the quest of better understanding in *both* areas.⁶⁵

The result of such dialogue will probably lead well beyond 'secularization' itself, away from the narrower ecclesiastically-based definition of religion, into wider cultural analysis. The trend to be welcomed, in my view, is that which treats our own society as anthropologists have treated 'alien' societies. This is much more likely to provide a realistic picture of the 'signs of the times' – including those forms of symbol to which people *really* refer as guides to life. Coupled with new opportunities in social science to be explicit about one's presuppositions, such understanding could yet become the vitally-needed complement to responsible Christian mission in the modern world.

¹Larry Shiner, 'The Concept of Secularisation in Empirical Research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 6, 1967, pp. 207-20.

²Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' in H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays on Sociology* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948).

³Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

⁴The sixth definition of secularization, referring as it does to a general process of social change, is not relevant to our present discussion.

⁵David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

⁶Peter Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularization: the Critique of a Concept* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

⁷Karel Dobbelaeere, *Secularization: a Multi-dimensional Concept* (*Current Sociology* (Monograph) 29:2, summer 1981).

⁸Harry Ausmus, *The Polite Escape: the Myth of Secularization* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1982).

⁹Richard Fenn, *Liturgies and Trials: The Secularization of Religious Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p. 8.

¹⁰Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1982), p. xv.

¹¹J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (London: SCM, 1965).

¹²Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM, 1980).

¹³Friedrich Gogarten, *The Reality of Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959).

¹⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Fontana, 1959).

¹⁵Leon Morris, *The Abolition of Religion* (London: IVP, 1964).

¹⁶Harvey Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸See the rather different treatment of, e.g., Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

¹⁹E. R. Norman, *Christianity and World Order* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978); James Childress & David Harned (eds.), *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p. 19. Bryan Wilson, whose work is examined in the next section, sees secularization as systematically excluding Christian faith.

²⁰Peter Berger, 'A Sociological View of the Secularization of Theology', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6:3-16, 1969.

²¹See, e.g., Owen Chadwick's important *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) and David Lyon 'Secular Minds and Secular Societies', *Fides et Historia* (forthcoming).

²²This comes across in many of his writings. See, e.g., *How should we then live?* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1976).

²³The contrary view is explored interestingly by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Secularization and Moral Change* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967).

²⁴Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975), Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: a Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist, 1975).

²⁵Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983).

²⁶Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1982), p. 149.

²⁷Bryan Wilson, *Religion in secular society*, p. 149 (London: Watts, 1966).

²⁸Wilson (1982), p. 42.

²⁹Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribners, 1976).

³⁰Max Weber, in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 155. See also the comments in David Lyon, *Sociology and the Human Image* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1983) pp. 74-77.

³¹Ernst Gellner is quite convinced there can be no return or revival. See his *The Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974) especially the final chapter.

³²He refers to David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) on this. See below for further comment.

³³Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1964).

³⁴Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

³⁵The most recent evidence is in José Miranda *Marx against the Marxists* (London: SCM, 1980). It is probably true that Marx was less virulently anti-Christian in *practical policy* than many of his followers, but it is doubtful that 'enforced secularization' is inconsistent with Marx's position.

³⁶Vernon Pratt, *Religion and Secularization* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

³⁷S. S. Acquaviva, *The decline of the sacred in industrial society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 202.

³⁹Peter Berger, *The sacred canopy* (New York: Anchor, 1967) (UK: *The Social Reality of Religion*, Harmondsworth: Allen Lane).

⁴⁰Peter Berger *et al.*, *The Homeless Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974). See also David Lyon, 'Secularization and Sociology: the History of an Idea', *Fides et Historia* (13:2, 1981), pp. 38-52.

⁴¹Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Anchor, 1979).

⁴²Mary Douglas summarizes her views in 'The effects of Modernization on Religious Change', *Daedalus*, 111:1, 1982, pp. 1-19.

⁴³Of course, the dividing line between 'explaining' and 'explaining away' is a thin one. Douglas' work is highly suggestive and helpful, e.g., in trying to explain Old Testament food prohibitions. See, e.g., R. K. Harrison's comments in *Leviticus* (Leicester: IVP, 1980) pp. 27-29.

⁴⁴Mary Douglas (1982), p. 6.

⁴⁵Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1967).

⁴⁶Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975); J. A. Walter, *A Long Way from Home* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980; published as *Sacred Cows*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, in the USA).

⁴⁷This was Bonhoeffer's position, it seems. He could conceive of moderns as religionless.

⁴⁸See Robert Towler *Homo Religiosus* (London: Constable, 1974), chapter 8. Other candidates for inclusion as 'religion' include 'common' or 'folk' religion which is that constellation of beliefs and practices associated with luck, magic, and superstition. These are on occasions combined with (or grow in symbiotic relation with) official religion. David Martin picturesquely refers to 'subterranean theologies' (in *A Sociology of English Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1967). Beyond this is 'civil religion', a term made famous by Robert Bellah, and referring to the association of certain religious themes with nationality and civic identity. (See his *The Broken Covenant*, New York: Seabury, 1975). References to God in American presidential speeches are the classic example of this. Yet another possible evidence that religion is not altogether dead is perceived by some in the persistence of ritual in advanced societies, be they

capitalist (Robert Bocoock, *Ritual in Industrial Society*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1974) or (officially atheistic) state socialist (Christal Lane). Harry Ausmus (*op. cit.*) has brought the argument about secularization round full circle by proposing that 'secularization' is *itself* a form of 'religious' explanation of the world, a 'theodicy' to which people cling.

⁴⁹Martin Goodridge, 'Ages of Faith: Romance or Reality?' in *Sociological Review* 23:2, 1975, pp. 381-396, or George Marsden, America's 'Christian Origins': Puritan New England as a Case Study, in S. Reid (ed.), *The Influence of John Calvin on History* (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1983).

⁵⁰Recent examples include: Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982), Alan Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (London: Longman, 1980), or George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980).

⁵¹Richard Fenn's *Toward a theory of Secularization* (Storrs, Connecticut: U of Connecticut, 1978) makes this point well.

⁵²For a survey from several different perspectives see Eileen Barker (ed.), *New Religious Movements* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1982).

⁵³On the UK see Steven Bruce, 'The Persistence of Religion', *Sociological Review* 1983.

⁵⁴Andrew Greeley, *Unsecular Man* (New York: Dell, 1974).

⁵⁵See further comments on this in David Lyon, 'Rethinking Secularization: retrospect and prospect', *Review of Religious Research* (forthcoming).

⁵⁶Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe*

(New York. Oxford UP, 1982).

⁵⁷Bryan Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (London: Heinemann/New York: Humanities Press, 1983). Such theorizing also has implications for some liberation theologians who blithely assume that religion can represent a 'dominant ideology'.

⁵⁸Richard Fenn, *Liturgies and Trials. the Secularization of Religious Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

⁵⁹Eileen Barker, 'In the beginning: the battle of creationist science against evolution' in R. Wallis (ed.), *On the Margins of Science* (Sociological Review Monograph 27).

⁶⁰See, e.g., Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: from Judgement to Calculation* (Cambridge: MIT, 1976/Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

⁶¹See Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁶²See e.g., Bernice Martin, 'The Socialisation of Disorder: Symbolism in Rock Music', *Sociological Analysis* 40:2, 1977, pp. 87-124.

⁶³E.g., Os Guinness, *op. cit.*, and Williamson and Perrota (eds.), *Christianity confronts Modernity* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1981).

⁶⁴See David Bebbington, *Patterns in History* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1979) and David Lyon, 'Valuing in Social Theory: Postempiricism and Some Christian Objections', *Christian Scholar's Review* (XII: 4, 1983), pp. 324-338.

⁶⁵On this, see David Lyon, *Sociology and the Human Image* (Leicester and Downers Grove. IVP, 1983) especially chapter 2.

In the wake of 19th century European industrialization and secularization, three social theorists attempted to examine the relationship between religion and society: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. They are among the founding thinkers of modern sociology. Faith provided the justification for society to exist beyond the mundane and partial explanations of existence as provided in science, even to consider an intentional future: "for faith is before all else an impetus to action, while science, no matter how far it may be pushed, always remains at a distance from this." At the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber pessimistically describes the fate of modern humanity as an "iron cage."