Secularization: the fate of faith in modern society

David Lyon

The author is senior lecturer at Bradford and Ilkley College, and has written on the themes of liberation, salvation, and society (including recently Sociology and the Human Image, later reviewed in this Themelios).

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 any influence on society that it is once said to have had. Modernity sounds religion's death-knell. Both in popular speech and in academic discourse,\\n
Definitions 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 understanding the secularization of the term. The point 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 origins in theological statement, we shall take a specific look at the 'theology' of secularization.

that the teaching task should foster a global concern. This concern will not simply grow of itself and apart from teaching stimulus, any more than other forms of true holiness will grow without the input of Scripture. A true teacher will take an axe to the roots of parachorlism and show that Christianity and the systematic theology its mission target countries and be prepared to set aside resources for the theological service of overseas churches.

The light of these immense challenges those of us specifically engaged in Christian education will have to learn to live more and more each day with the sober “we who teach shall be judged with greater stringency” (Jas. 3:1).

Secularization is 'conformity with this world'. In this case attention is said to turn from the supernatural to the natural. The church is known with this, says Shiner, is the ambiguity involved in measuring such secularization. Are not theological definitions a form of social science? Who is to decide how increasing distances itself from religion, especially in public life, but also in spheres such as education and welfare? Is the postulate that state dogma, 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 disenchantment’, thinks not. Rather, secular life is endowed with religious legitimation. That is, the opposite of secularization is occurring. Clearly, secularization is more subtle than it appears at first. ‘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 a religious eschatology. ‘Obvious’ it may be to some, but this example highlights the main difficulties of secularization as transposition. How do religious and secular understandings of the way the world is put together relate to another in a causal fashion? Shiner is confident that he has sniffed out another illegitimate theological assumption here.

Secularization is defined as ‘the desacralization 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). The gradual loss of a sense of the sacred (as Mirece Eliade put it) 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, it was not that religion was completely swept away within Protestantism (in asserting that nature is not itself infused with magic or mystery) which helped foster the early development of science. But what definitions do? Theorists (I say and I largely agree) that the idea of disenchantment, desacralization, 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 think of them as forms 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’; Peter Glaser’s ‘The Sociology of Secularization’ and Karel Dobbeleare’s ‘Secularization: a Concept and an Event’. Key to Glaser’s definition of secularization by ‘counter-religious ideologies’. The term has been wielded as a weapon in a war against religions and anti-religious. In an essay entitled ‘Why the word can be read as meaning ‘neutral’ the word can be read as meaning ‘neutral’. Exploring such issues is of perennial importance for social science. Peter Glaser’s article is somewhat further, showing that secularization may have the status of a ‘social myth’ by which people come to understand and construe their world in a different way by the more recent book by Harry Assmus, ‘The Polite Escape’. Glaser’s demolition work is more thought-provoking 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 Dobbeleare, whose teasing out of the ‘dimensions’ of secularization is not from Shiner’s. Dobbeleare places together ‘disenagement, desacralization and transposition’ and refers to them collectively as ‘laicisation’. 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 desacralization) spells an ever-increasing social reliance on technology and calculation. Dobbeleare 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 occasions of collective withdrawal from religious organisations. For a current example, many churches are moving from unconnected 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, unfailing, or clear-cut definitions 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 temporary” as (recently as) Richard Pennet 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’ world. There are several gains to make from this, some of which carry us another step further than where Dobbeleare leaves us. For example, ‘conformity with the world’ as what we shall leave for the ‘other’ world’. From a Christian perspective, an ambiguity lurks here. Concern with the world as ‘created order’ is
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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 any influence on society that it is once said to have had. Modernity sounds religion's death-knell. Both in popular speech and in the academic discourse, religious propositions 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 the 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 meaning of the term. Then, as some of the sociological disputes have their origin in theological statement, we shall take a specific look at the 'theology' of secularization.

that the teaching task should foster a global concern. This concern will not simply grow of itself and apart from teaching stimuli, any more than other forms of true holiness will grow without the input of Scripture. A true teacher will take an axe to the roots of parochialism and in this way the local church and the pastor will win the largeness of theological endeavour across national barriers.

This is already happening. What started with the Servant-theology of Mohrmann, Metz and Bonhoeffer has flourished ultimately as the liberation theology of Latin America. It is vital, then, that the great evangelical tradition takes seriously the growing significance of theological work and theologies on its mission target countries and be prepared to set aside resources for the theological service of overseas churches.

In the light of these immense challenges those of us specifically engaged in Christian education will have to learn to live more and more each day with the sober words, 'we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness' (Jas. 3:1). [The Seoul Declaration, August 1982, in Missiology, vol. X, no. 4(Oct. 1982), p. 491.]

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 transformation of the Christian church'. Shiner is well known for his use of the term 'secularization'. "Obvious" it may be to some, but this example highlights the main difficulties of secularization as transposition. How do the theological and cultural implications of such a transposition relate to historical processes? Is this a 'transposition'? Shiner is confident that he has sniffed out another illegitimate theological assumption here.

Shiner's sixth 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 'desecrament'. (Einzahung) The gradual loss of a sense of the sacred (as Mirea Eliade puts it) 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, it is not a case of the Christian angels 'flying into thin air'. Instead, he sees a change in meaning of religious concepts. For a current example, many churches are moving from unconcern to awareness or involvement in 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, neat definitions of secularization can't do. They can act 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 Fet) 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 world' than with judgement of life comes. There are several gains to make from this, some of which carry us another step further than where Dobellere leaves us for. Example, 'conformity' can be measured as: 'what are the experts thinking of us?' A third, from a Christian perspective, an ambiguity lurks here. Concern with the world as 'created order' is
The theology of secularization

Rather like the sociological debate, the theological one about secularization was a first attempt to be, pass out of fashion. But the similarity continues, in that the assumptions surrounding the debate are still invoked, implicitly or explicitly, nearly a 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, it is true that books like Don Cupitt's Taking Leave of God and some productions of the liberation theology school follow the same trail. Each of these attempts is an attempt to come to terms with modernity, with the social conditions of the mid- and later twentieth century. Perceiving the problems from different sets of concerns, the theologians, they try to recast Christianity in this mood. Secularism may become, in this view, a truly Christian option.

It must be immediately conceded that, at base, some of these secular theologians, like Eberhard Schumacher, Manfred Ebeling for instance, argue that secularization in the sense of humans taking responsibility for the world (rather than just being in bondage to the goal of the biblical call to salvation). In such a case, there is a 'socialization tendency' within the Puritanism which insisted that nature is not imbued with magical forces. It is clear that Gogarten and friends wished to travel a very different road from Puritanism. In 'taking responsibility' for life, human beings were frequently asked to be 'coming of age'. Possessing the technological means to control nature seemed to mean that an old reference to the transcendental God of ritual religion could happily be jettisoned. Homo religiousus 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 popularized this secularism. His objection was to various aspects of Christian 'religion' which seemed to him (and to most Christians, one would imagine) to be particularly susceptible to 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 Christianity, an aspect which is not exclusively at stake in the temporal, the political, is the denial of disciplined, Peter Berger put his finger on an important distinction although, as every theologian knows, however much his admirers wish to deny that Bonhoeffer meant what he said at certain points, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that he is saying something useful about Christianity; his language is a repudiation of some basic Christian truths.

Hence it comes as no surprise that Robinson, who frequently refers to Bonhoeffer, takes religiousness as a belief regarding which we feel no particular commitment. But the most important reason why Robinson mistook Paul Tillich and Bonhoeffer to be saying more or less the same thing, which was that 'secular man' has as much religiously as he is atmospherically, 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 roy 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.' But Cox and Robinson shared the same mentor, Benjamin Spock. In his book, The Secular Metropolis, he takes 'secular' to mean 'temporality', but rather than seeing this in terms of the difficulty of the religious concept. Indeed, secularization has been 'outgrown': Secularization is man turning his attention away from the worlds beyond and towards this world and this time. Cox also sees the process represented 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 stage alone. Of course, there are no sharp boundaries between Cox and secularization are closely linked together, although the nature of the relationship is a matter for debate and study.

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 some '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 and is much more than 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 the fort of Cox, 'pointing out of faith', when James Childress as, David Hare, and 'Is secularization really as hospitable to Christian faith as Christian faith seems hospitable to secularization?'

Of course, the answers to such critiques and queries indicate that secularization in particular, the modernity of secularization, as we have seen, are important for the survival of authentic Christianity. Others may be inimical to it. Again, the strong secularization thesis

The strong secularization thesis is that the modern world pushes traditional religion to the margins of society, leaving it no role to play at the centre of social life. It is a process by which all traditional religious institutions and organizations and consciousness, lose their social significance'. (He has stuck with more or less this definition of secularization in his later work, Religion in secular society. A calculating rationalist, concerned for the best means rather than the best ends, has corroded old beliefs and morality, not just in an intellectual sense, but by dull repetition. A religious legitimation of the power of the state, when democracy is the order of the day? And who needs persons-religious or not-to retrieve and maintain social and political systems have largely supplanted interpersonal concern and the deeply implanted virtues of honesty, industry, goodwill, responsibility, and the like.

This strong thesis is derived above all from the work of Max Weber, on rationalization. In 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' 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 this 'lamented, foreshortened, but still, live in a society characterised by 'mechanized petrifaction', 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 encroach- ment of the 'cult of expertise', and the 'lack of options' available 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 was the hallmark of the rationalization of the 'cult of expertise', and its spread to Weber. As he said, 'precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life...'. 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 he regrets the virtual disappearance of the 'cult of expertise', the uprooting of the age-old social order, in which it was the place and the person who knew the right things who mattered, in which there was a place, the person who knew the right things who mattered, in which there was a place. Nature and God were in the image of a 'natural' order, which could be revealed to us by the right people. Not that this necessarily means that all believed. Rather, religion was social significant in a deep way, both in a natural and in a political sense. Wilson's point is that the massive regional variation in the modern societies once touched by Christianity. The indicators may be different from place to place, and the person may be slow or slow.

But here, 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. Wilson then introduces the modern concept of consumption, co-ordination, control, and knowledge (possession and dissemination) were under religious authority. As such, the things that once were consigned to socially irrelevant private spaces, away from where 'real life' is lived. Thus for Wilson, loss of
mandatory, but when such a concern lacks a transcendent dimension, that is, when it is seen not 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's sense of 'a rudimentary organisation of a field of phenomena which yields problems for investigation'. The agenda for investigation, I believe, clarified by the work of Stuart, 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 shall return, but before that we must note one other muddying of the waters achieved by the 'theology of secularisation'.

Theology of secularisation

Rather like the sociological debate, the theological one, too, is bate over the secularising first to be passe, out of fashion. But the similarity continues, in that the assumptions surrounding the debate are still invoked, implicitly or explicitly, nearly a 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, much has happened that books like Don Cupit's Taking Leave of God and some productions of the liberation theology school follow the same trail. Each side has its protagonists who attempt to come to terms with modernity, with the social conditions of the mid- and later twentieth century. Perceiving the possibilities and the limitations of the prospects of secularization, they try to recast Christianity in this mood. Even secularism may become, in this view, a truly Christian option.

It must be quickly conceded that, at base, some of these secular theologies, for example, Gogarten for instance, argue that secularisation is the sense of humans taking responsibility for the world (rather than just being in accordance with the goal of the biblical addition. There was a 'secularisation' 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 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 transcendence 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 theologists took the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as their starting point. He it was who had popularised this conception of Christianity. His objection was to various aspects of Christian 'religion', which seemed to him (and to most Christians, one would imagine), to be a sacrifice of the particularity 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 Christianity. Lived in the context of the temporal, the political, is the denial of discipleship, Peter Berger put his finger on an important modern interpretation of Christianity as the destruction of secularization: this was the 'secularisation of theology'. That is, theological development clearly does not take place in a social vacuum. Rather, said Berger, secularisation is a deficiency of the basic, and the secularisation of wider social processes as the decline of Christendom, the competition offered to Christian faith by 'imported' alternatives from other cultures, increasing geographical and social movement, and the pervasive influence of the mass media.

Berger is here engaging in one of his favourite sports: relativizing the relativisers'. For the vulgar 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 look as inadequate as those of the moderns. They also be seen also 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 grasp it successfully with it.

Clarke uses the debate about 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 him could be accused of having the misconception that social changes tend always to follow intellectual ones rather than vice versa. But the study of secularisation has been one of his main contributions in suspending social factors might be rather significant. For example, it provides a leading motif to the work of two authors who tried to appreciate the role of both religion and sociology: Robin Gill and Gregory Baum. Gill, an Anglican, argued in The Social Context of Theology, that 'the social study of religion is the ground' and that the 'world is severely hampered without some grasp of the social dimension of secularisation, Baum, a Catholic, similarly that secularisation is a frame for discussing the interaction between theology and society. In some popular vein, Os Guinness has articulated for an evangelical audience another version of the same conviction. In The Gravedigger File he warns against the social subversion (and unwitting churlish- churlishly in this of Christianity).

All this returns us to where we began, the social analysis of secularisation. For all the optimism of the secular theologists, can Christianity really survive in a secular society? Is this the issue addressed in the 'strong secularisation thesis' written in the writings of Oxford sociologist Bryan Wilson.

The strong secularisation thesis

The strong secularisation thesis is that the modern world pushes traditional religion to the margins of society, leaving it no role to play at the centre of social life. It is a process, for which only by extenuations and adaptations, and actions and consciousness, lose their social significance. (He has stuck with more or less this definition. What is 'Religion in secular society'? A calculating rationalism is concerned for the best means rather than the best ends, has corroded old beliefs and morality, not just in an intellectual sense, but by retreating from the social system. By the religious legitimation of the power of the state, when democracy is the order of the day? And who needs person-to-person, face-to-face relationships? Computers and data systems have largely supplanted interpersonal concern and the deeply implanted virtues of honesty, industry, goodwill, responsibility and so on.

This strong thesis is derived above all from the work of Max Weber, on 'rationalization'. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism8 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 he lamented, is to live in a society characterised by 'mechanised 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 enroachment of a Galtonian Law of natural selection8 on students in 1918. One aspect of this can be traced to the rapid rise of double-entry accounting in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Numbers and quantitative thinking displaced a qualitative approach to thinking about the world, according to Weber. As he said 'precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life ...'. He saw little hope of their revival.

Wilson catches Weber's wishfulness. 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 he has a sense of irretrievable. The cityscape of an earlier era does teach us something about the dominance of religion, in the way of comparison which is still a useful workplace. Not that this necessarily means that all believed. Rather, religion was socially significant in a deep way. Wilson sees and 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 slower or sooner.

But here, it has happened, according to Wilson, something he calls 'societalization' has occurred. Communities, local, persisting, face-to-face groups, have fragmented or disappeared. Human life is lived in a societally (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. With the computer, introduce of consumption, co-ordination, control, and knowledge (possession and dissemination) were under religious duties. As a result, a personal sacrament, 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 mortality. Hence, he says, the question of personal gain as the symbol of what dominates modern life. We now live in a technical, not a moral order. "The whole transmission process by which each succeeding generation is rendered obsolescent in the transitory world of commuting, migrating, and the separation of home and community that is the inheritance of personal property or the community's own, the only checks on which are (rationally) negotiated laws. What with natural explanations of events, technical control of everyday life (traffic lights to control an intersection), one for the 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 powerful enough individually to sustain societality 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 coherence. The boundaries, he felt, the legitimacy of, and social forms of religious life became indistinct. Karl Marx was another who perceived the demise of traditional religion. The secularizing effects of the progressions of society had undermined the most heavenly ecstasy of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the industrial society.\footnote{Althusser continues on Marx's own stance towards religion, his followers have done much more 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\footnote{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 word, are 'atheist.' 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.} and Sabino Aracivita sticks more closely to empirical evidence about church-related activity (mainly in the context of the Church of England) in his Modern Society. He accepts that industrialisation does bring about a crisis of faith, from which there appears to be no escape. Arguably, this is a case of tribal myopia. Have science, technology, and bureaucracy really 'quench' the sources of religious feeling? Being a theologian, he says, frequently seems to explain away\footnote{Religious belief in terms of its supposed social function.} religious doubts it. The marvels of modern science are at least awe-inspiring as discoveries of a previous era. And the vast achievements of human ingenuity provoke crises of identity, but are not such the very stuff of the religious quest, since time immemorial? She wishes to see how society is able to adapt to the modern secular society.}\footnote{It 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 the('</s>')
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Wilson sees religion in terms of its contribution to social mortality. Hence these resistance 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. Communication technologies that each successive generation is rendered obsolete in the transitory world of commuting, migrating, and the separation of home and work. The traditional notion of doing 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 control the meaning of 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 religious, or the flowering of new religious movements, are powerless to reconstruct a society in secularization and secularism. 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 significant in industrial society. The separating out of different spheres of life rendered religion less able to maintain its overwhelming power. The traditional, legitimate institutions of society, such as religion, social forms of religiosity emerging within industrial society, a possibility about which Wilson is less than convinced. Wilson prodding the secularization in more conventional terms. Karl Marx was another who perceived the demise of traditional religion. The secularizing effects of the progressive process have undermined the most heavily ecstatics of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the concrete industrial life, he continued in his own way. But of course the debate continues on Marx's own stance towards religion, his followers have done much to promote the impression that secularization should be seen as a positive policy step 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 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 word, it is 'out of joint'. 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) to argue that modernity is simply a matter for the industrial society. He accepts that industrialization does bring about a crisis of faith, from which there appears to be no recovery. He refers to the 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 religion, the third of God's gifts – love, truth, and ancient ways of giving significance to our own existence, of confronting life and death, are becoming increasingly taken for granted. It is not so much that modernization is unhappy with such bias towards the assumed 'goodness' of religion on several counts, but most generally because of the lack of a common currency. Is it not the case that both what religion does for people (integrate them into society?) and what religion most people actually hold (superstitious, magical beliefs) are now so different? The most celebrated version of the latter objection, that the definition of religion is too narrow, comes from Thomas Luckmann. Conventional religion may well have receded from the centre of modern life, but are there not other ways of seeing the world that have maintained some of the traditional functions of religion? Such 'invisible religions' could be seen in today's family-centeredness, sexuality, or individualism. Christian authors, writing more popularly, have come right and argued that we are really talking about modern forms of idolatry. 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. It also makes mandatory what Douglas calls, for naming evaluation of the different claims and effects of different religions: they are not all the same. Biblical distinctions are useless, and it is no use trying to secularize Christianity. 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, it is one of the central criticisms of the thesis that it is imperative to clear up what is included under the 'religion' rubric.

So secularization has been a Processual bed. A sociological theory has been imposed on historical data in a rather rash fashion. For example, many (who should know better) have failed to understand the trap of imagining that once-upon-a-time society was 'really' religious. Such a moment is taken to be the baseline from which secularization begins. Most sociologists who have the rubric to concede that they are referring to a time when ecclesiastical and political power were closely linked. This could mean that the distinction of Christian faith (whose bed is not of this world) thus put 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 attested. The same ways are, in a sense, the case of tribal myopia. Have science, technology and bureaucracy really 'quenched the sources of religious feelings' or has human nature remained constant? Dwayneakkisi does not doubt it. The marvels of modern science are at least as awe-inspiring as discoveries of a previous era. And the vast new horizons that moderns encounter, like the second world, provoke crises of identity, but are such not the very stuff of the religious quest, since time immemorial? She wishes to show precisely why the image has been seen as just as 'secular' as modernity; 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 the question of what constitutes secularization. After all, 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 religious, cultural and political factors. As for the USA, it comes as little surprise to him that Sweden, which still has a state church, should in fact have a very low attendance, whereas the opposite situation is found in the USA. In fact, too many secularization theories have been naive with regard to historical data. The point to be made is not that these studies benefit only benefit attempts to theorize secularization. One major advantage conferred by such studies is that the role of human actions is brought more clearly into the scene than in many standard sociologies of secularization (which tended to be weighted towards the 'massive social causes'). In short, the idea is that the 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 main example is the rise of Christian fundamentalism which blossomed since the mid-century, for example, even if they have no direct effect on the running of society, can have great significance. The resurgence of traditional Christian religion (especially Evangelicalism in the USA, but also the Roman Catholic Church in the UK) is a modest secularization theory. This would not necessarily have to go to the lengths of Andrew Greeley's blunderbuss argument that 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, taken for granted as such, is used only with great caution by others. As a problematic, it still serves a useful purpose of alerting us to a cluster of issues which deserve serious investigation in our day, issues at the heart of the ongoing process of rethinking secularization should yield positive benefits for clarification of the present religious situation in society. However, the term itself with its artificiality, its 'rationalization'. But it is appropriate to conclude with a few observations on possible new directions discernible in current research.

New directions in secularization studies}

The dominant story 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 'religious 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, both secular and religious.

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 'The Secularisation of Western Europe.' He has paid special attention to religion among the working classes. Investigations like these can eventually contribute to a general sociology of secular processes. For instance, it has often been argued that there is a basic incompatibility between the work of David Martin and Bryan Wilson. That religion was once very 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 religiousness.

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 this question. On the basis of his work, I shall take the place of 'ultimate authority,' sometimes overruling that of sincere religious conviction. (One of his most interesting points is the fact that many women wish to have her life-support machine switched off was discounted by the court.) Scientific authority is another area of importance. There is a recent and exciting study of scientific authority to make their case. 5 It seems to me that important work could be done in relating the current growth and diffusion of information technology to secularization. It is an example of the fact that we are further abandoning the authority of properly formed human judgment in favour of mere 'calculation.' 6 Or to put it as a metaphor, of random decision-making, rather than as somehow possessing that capacity?

Another new direction, if it may be so termed, is to find clues about the secularization process in 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, asceticism, and so on, are replaced by secular practices such as dietary control. 7 Again, increased concern with cultural symbols of how such phenomena - such as rock music - may be symptomatic of a secularizing tendency. 8 (Moves like this also serve to help put religion back on the sociological agenda, as some might have interpreted it as a 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. To talk in market terms about 'secular society' is not on. Thankfully, some hopeful signs are emerging, which demonstrate an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of 'secularization.' 9 For instance, the secularization of thought is of immense importance. But Christian commentators, ought not to be confused (though the connections should be displayed) with social scientists and secularizers. An aspect of the secularization of thought is what is often called the 'loss of a Christian mind'. From a Christian viewpoint this is quite an important concept. It is the idea that church is no longer central, that the church ceases to be the place of Christian and Church 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 dispelled from definitions of the process. 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 example, if 'secularization' is a concept that can be properly located and assessed) is ever a matter of rhetoric. 10 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 the biblical and ecclesiastical definitions of 'sacred authority.' It is illuminating for secularization studies. There is no excuse for allowing secularization studies to become a secular pursuit by default.

So does 'secularization' tell us anything about the 'fact of faith in the modern world?' The answer I have given is yes, in a limited way it helpfully assists us to some significant dimensions of the religion-and-society problem. It is not complete, and it is clear, for example, that anything as such. It indicates some connections between modern life and religious practice, although in itself it is not easy to escape the conclusion that there is a 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 developments' may be reflected in an almost mystical way produced. So the onus is on those who care about relating social science to a Christian worldview (as is the case with some other efforts to embed the sociology of religion in the context of other disciplines) to fill the need of better understanding, in both areas. 11

The result of such dialogue will probably lead well beyond the limits of any discipline, away from the rather ecclesiastically-based definition of religion, into wider cultural analysis. The trend to be welcomed, in my view, is that our own society's increasing secularization is treated 'alien' societies. This is much more likely to provide a realistic picture of the 'signs of the times' - in churches, of the signs 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 commitment to responsible Christian mission in the modern world.


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


'The concept of 'secularization' is useful when applied to: The Secularization of Language (Blackwell, 1982), p. 8.


'Harvey Cox, op. cit., p. 1.


The theological response to secularization must clearly become more sophisticated than that exhibited in the excesses of the 1960s secular theology. To talk in market-basket terms about 'secular society' is not on. Thankfully, some hopeful signs are emerging, which demonstrate an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of 'secularization.' For instance, the secularization of thought is at last being challenged by Christian commentators, not as a straw-man argument but as a real and significant process. For instance, it has often been argued that there is a basic incompatibility between the work of David Martin and Bryan Wilson. That religion once was, and is still, 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.

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 ways in which the church has become the place of ultimate authority, sometimes overruling that of sincere religious conviction. (One of his most interesting points is that some women who wish to have her life-support machine switched off was discounted by the court.) Scientific authority is another area that Fenn has addressed, and religion is just one of those areas for scientific authority to make its case. 4. It seems to me that important work could be done in relating the current growth and diffusion of information technology to secularization. It is an example of how we are further abandoning the authority of properly formed human judgment in favour of mere calculation. Or rather, how we are further abandoning the authority of reasoning, decision-making, rather than as somehow possessing that capacity?

Another new direction, if it may be so termed, is to find clues about 'secularization' in 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, asceticism, and so on, are replaced by secular practices such as dietary control. 5 Again, increased concern with cultural symbols of how such phenomena - such as rock music - may be symptomatic of a secularizing tendency. 6 (Moves like this also serve to help put religion back on the sociology agenda; some might have interpreted an interdisciplinary move of being obsessed with a concept (secularization) which seemed to bid farewell to the subject-matter of the sociology of religion.)

The result of such dialogue will probably lead well beyond the boundaries of religious sociology, away from the narrower ecclesiastically-based definition of religion, into wider cultural analysis. The trend to be welcomed, in my view, is that the treatment of our society as anthropologists have treated 'alien' societies. This is much more likely to provide a realistic picture of the 'signs of the times' in cultural change, symbols 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 component to responsible Christian mission in the modern world.


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The most recent evidence is in Jose Miranda vs the Marazion (London: SCM, 1980). It is probably true that while there is a general public policy that prevents the church from influencing many of his followers, it is doubtful that 'enforced secularization' is consistent with Marx's position.


PHILIP ABRAMS, Historical Sociology (Sheffield Mellen: Open Books, 1982).


HARVEY COX, op. cit., p. 1.


Of course, the dividing line between 'explaining' and 'explaning' is quite vague in practice, and it is still quite easy to be both helpful and, e.g., in trying to explain Old Testament food prohibitions, to make a contribution to contemporary science and to Bonhoeffer's comments in LEVITICUS (Leicester: IVP, 1980) pp. 27-29.


J. A. WALTER, A Long Way Home (Exeter: Pater Nash, 1975) and Sacred Cows, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, in the USA.

This was Bonhoeffer's position, it seems. He could conceivably mean either of the following things:

See Robert Town Hewo Religious (London: Constable, 1974). This book, like the other works, is written as a 'religious' book, e.g., it includes 'common' or 'folk' religion which is that constellation of beliefs and practices associated with luck, magic, and superstition. This is on occasions combined with (or grow in symbiotic relation with) official religion. David Martin pictures 'subterranean theology' (A Sociology of English Religion, London: Heinemann, 1967). Beyond this is the growing recognition of the need to seek common ground with the church. See, e.g., Edward S. Shaub, Jr., "Secularization and the Church," in Christianity and Culture (New York: Seabury, 1975). References to God in American presidential speeches are the classic example of this. Yet another possible example might have been the 1987 death is perceived by some in the persistence of ritual in advanced societies, but they
Pre-Christian Gnosticism, the New Testament, and Nag Hammadi in recent debate

Edwin Yamauchi

Pre-Christian Gnosticism, the New Testament, and Nag Hammadi in recent debate

Dr Yamauchi, professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, is chairman of the Institute for Biblical Research, the American counterpart of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research. This article is a revised form of a lecture delivered to the IBR in Dallas, Texas, in December 1985, and is excerpted from the second edition of his book Pre-Christian Gnosticism (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) by permission of the publisher. The first edition appeared in 1965 (London: Tyndale Press, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). In the intervening decade, the stream of writings on Gnosticism, both Christian and non-Christian, has been so significant in the field of New Testament and Early Judaism that by 1984 the volume of literature was 70 per cent larger than the first, which indicates the quantity of fresh information to be taken into account. His assessment of recent writings and of the state of the argument, in a field where hazardous hypotheses (so often believe the exegesis of single scholars) is, therefore, not a Gnostic hermeneutic, as derived from Reitzenstein, but rather a new, more neutral, and less ideological reading of the Nag Hammadi library. It is still the case that there are no Gnostic texts which date with certainty from the pre-Christian period. J. M. Robinson declared at the congress at Yale in 1978: "At this stage we have not found any Gnostic texts that clearly anticipate the origin of Christianity." 23 His 1981 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature Robinson conceded, pre-Christian Gnosticism as such is hardly attested in a way that Christian Gnosticism is. W. W. MacRae declares, "And the evidence is that the original works represented in the Nag Hammadi library are much older than the extant copies, we are still at the pre-Christian period. Nevertheless there seems to be no lack of scholars who, unhampered by the lack of pre-Christian Gnostic documents, proceed with confidence to carry out a future project of developing or evaluating Gnosticism. The view that Gnosticism is an essential element in the hermetical circle to understand the context of the New Testament and to develop the text. MacRae and Koester,24 and 25 and Schmithals.26 Following the concert of 'Numismatic', which he and Preparatoro led the pre-Christian Gnosticism of the New Testament and Early Judaism is, therefore, not a Gnostic hermeneutic, as derived from Reitzenstein, but rather a new, more neutral, and less ideological reading of the Gnostic character. The "usual conclusion that there were no Gnostic documents, however, goes too far.

3. The patristic evidence on Simon Magus

In a letter written to the New Testament against Gnosticism that began with Simon Magus, some scholars have continued to seek the roots of Gnosticism in Gnostic in Samaria. J. Fossman stresses the links of Gnosticism with the background of Simon Magus, who I believe (as a result of a study of the Magi) has borrowed the idea of a second Creator from the Magi.27 U. Schmieden has the Magi history of Simon Magus that is, however, a very questionable28 and the sources for the Magi are quite late.

As for whether or not we can take Simon Magus as an early Gnostic, there is a clear conflict between Acts 8, our earliest
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.