A RESPONSE

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"Secularization" is the process of social change in the direction of the secular. Just what that means will hinge on the meaning of "secular" or on whatever it is that the secular is regarded as contrary to. As Professor Whitley has shown, there are several different views as to just what it is we are talking about when we speak of secularization. I shall direct the first part of my remarks to the meaning of "secularism" rather than the process of social change, since the latter has been well covered in the essay and the responses.

It may come as a suprise to today's students to know that the subject of secularism received considerable attention in theological circles in the years following World War II. Secularism was regarded as a danger, and the tocsin was sounded. Accordingly the 1947 Evanston Conference lectures addressed themselves to "a malady in our civilization . . . [and] associate this sickness with 'secularism.' "[1] L. E. Loemker set the tone of the lectures with the statement that "secularism is practical atheism."[2] Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, as might be expected, did not go along with that simplification ,and objected especially to what he regarded as a false distinction between sacred and secular, but the prevailing opinion was against the bishop, which was not an unusual position for him to be in. A typical statement of that period can be found in Georgia Harkness' book, *The Modern Rival of Christian Faith: An Analysis of Secularism,* where the basic definition is: "Secularism is the organization of life as if God did not exist."[3]

I remember preaching a sermon "In Defense of Secularism" in 1954, shortly before Edwin E. Aubrey's *Secularism a Myth*[4] came out, and wishing later that I had had opportunity to read it in my preparation. Aubrey catalogued "the indiscriminate use of the term," surveyed the historical background, and gave attention to "spiritual values in secular movements."[5]

Thus when Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Prisoner for God*[6] appeared in

[1] J. Richard Spann, ed., *The Christian Faith and Secularism.* Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1958, Foreword.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 11. J. Edgar Hoover carried the view a step further with the statement: "Secularism, I have never doubted, is the basic cause of crime, and crime is a manifestation of secularism." p. 182.

[3] *Op. cit.* New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952, p. 11.

[4] *Op. cit.* New York: Harper, 1954.

[5] *Ibid.,* pp. 25-42, 109-137.

[6] London: SCM Press. Later published under the title, *Letters and Papers from Prison.* New York: Macmillan, rev. ed., 1967. John Dewey had conjoined the secular and the religious in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* in 1920, and as Aubrey reminds us, of course there were precedents for this all through history.

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1953, it was not a new point of view that was expressed in his "religionless Christianity," but because of the circumstances under which he had written and the ripeness of the times, it had great influence. So we find in the 1960s much attention given to the secular, secularism and secularization, but now more often as a rallying cry of "right on." It is therefore highly worthwhile that such terms be examined somewhat more objectively and attempts made to study the processes of social change which might be called secularization.

The situation has not altered much, however, in the confusion which abounds as to the meaning that is to be assigned to the word. I think it can be argued that the *religious* need not be considered as the most appropriate polar contrary to the *secular*. The contrary of religious is irreligious. The contrary of sacred is profane. Of course the assignment of terms is in itself not very important, but as is well known in logic, false dichotomies lend themselves to confusion in thought and analysis of things that *are* important. Since religious concerns and activities alter their form and manner of expression – and very rapidly of late –, it is easy to interpret such change as loss or weakening of the religious dimensions of life. Whitley has done an admirable job of pointing out this danger and how it tempts writers who have an axe to grind.

It seems to me to render the question somewhat clearer if we place some such term as ecclesiasticism in opposition to *secularism*. Furthermore, there is, I submit, some ground for arguing that this polar contrast comes close to what is meant when the topic is discussed in ordinary language. Now by ecclesiasticism I mean the control, or a significant degree of control, whether by direct or indirect means, by official representatives of conventional religious institutions over norms, procedures, public ceremonies, permissible modes of change, and the accepted rationale or rhetoric of legitimation in a society. It also connotes a pervasive influence on the accepted world view in terms of which the foregoing matters, and the social issues attached to them, can be discussed in the public forum. Now if you have an unofficial but widely accepted religion of the state, as Mr. Wilbanks suggests, this greatly complicates my definition as well as locating the high priests and spokesmen for such an ecclesiasticism. Although that is an inconvenience for a scheme of analysis, it is, I fear, a correct reading of the situation.

Nevertheless, the loss of the sort of control of which I have spoken would be a movement toward secularism. I am inclined to think that what we really have in the American scene is a continual flux of movement toward secularization in some respects and toward ecclesiasticism

in others, with astonishing reversals and incompatible movements. If so, secularization would have to be measured with respect to selected factors over a very limited span of time. The general social picture reminds me of the churning, swirling waters beneath the headgates where I used to swim as a boy. Measurement of any one part of the current would be tricky, but possible, given sufficiently refined instruments.

I agree, then, with Whitley that the term secularization can still be used fruitfully.[7] But if it is ill defined or too broadly defined – as is the case when it is regarded as contrary to "religion" –, it does not lend itself to useful social analysis.

Even though it is impressionistically drawn, the conclusion appears to be unavoidable that our society is at this stage becoming increasingly secularistic so far as control by officials of institutionalized religion is concerned. Examples cannot prove the case, but they illustrate the claim. Among those that come to mind are the open discussion in public media of birth control, abortion and euthanasia, and the analysis of issues of international relations in categories other than those of communism and anti-communism, and a diminishing need to clear things with the clergy or have clerical formalities in connection with public affairs. To suggest another example, which may be more questionable, it appears to me that the ethical influence of religious teaching has diminished on such matters as stealing and cheating and ripping off in general. Theft is not too difficult to measure, but the influences which affect it are. In Switzerland personal dishonesty is relatively rare and under strong social disapproval. It is extremely difficult to determine just how it is that the religious traditions there have influence upon this – certainly it is not by direct ecclesiastical power –, but it is the conclusion of many foreigners who have lived there that by some strange moral osmosis the sanctions pertaining to integrity have been kept alive and that they have something to do with religion and the way that religion has been honored.

Thus it is a thorny business to attempt to measure influence or even to be certain of where it comes from or how it comes about. I am glad that philosophers can turn this problem over to the sociologists, although I doubt that they will respond with appropriate gratitude, and I even harbor doubts as to whether when it is measured it will be in instances of significant manifestation.

Further complicating this is the fact that what appears to be power may in reality be nothing more than nuisance insurance or decorative enterprise. For example, the establishment may use clerical

[7] At the conclusion of section III.

formalities, like prayer breakfasts, to reenforce policy. An observer might conclude that what is preached or prayed for controls policy decisions, for the rhetoric seems often to assert that. So the operator of the train whistle might be under the delusion that his efforts either propel or guide the train. And as long as the two matters coincide there is no way to know otherwise with certainty. If the breakfast pronouncements contradicted establishment policy, we could then watch to see which view prevailed. I have no doubt which of the two would prove determinative in that far-off eventuality, but since there is pretty general agreement, I cannot prove my suspicion to be true in fact. There are other cases that might be cited where the power of persuasive influence is rather clear if nonetheless mysterious.

Another difficulty stems from the way in which our life concerns have become increasingly this-wordly, a point also made by Whitley and his sources. Our traditions are such that this direction has tended to be regarded as non-religious. As I talk with people I get a strong impression that they are deeply and genuinely concerned about meaning, wholeness, and the direction of their lives. Now these are concerns which will not show up very dramatically in advertising, but they are closely associated with some of the traditional values of religion. After all, if you want something that will bring physical comfort, there is a commodity for sale which claims to answer that desire. But if you feel a threat of emptiness, confusion of personal identity, of lack of meaning in life, the solution is probably not a marketable commodity, but some sort of view or interpretation or experience that can at least make the claim that it meets the need. This phenomenon is reflected in advertising, but it is not what advertising generally is about. One thinks, however, of the flourishing practice of psychiatry and counseling, of books on astrology and the occult, of drugs – licit and illicit –, and the sundry movements and organizations that are in the business of providing life answers. These phenomena are neither ecclesiastical nor secular as such, but surely they reflect anxieties and interests to which contemporary religion might contribute constructively. Whether the churches can relate meaningfully to these concerns with integrity remains an open question, but I see this kind of social change as something apart from the issue of secularization.

These reflections were stimulated by Whitley's essay. I must confess to some skepticism about the value of further empirical research in measuring the movement toward secularization, however defined, especially if the theory is disclaimed that we have here some kind of law of social change. If a particular factor can be isolated, which correlates with secularism, that might indicate some principle of social

change, but the sort of factors that can be isolated and measured seem to be relatively trivial. It may well be that the significant item is not a measurable factor, but the pattern of a cluster of factors. I spoke of the swirling waters at the foot of the headgate, and I must now add that there was a larger pattern of which this was a part, and despite the churning confusion, the waters did move on in a downhill direction. One of the larger issues in this subject, worth further reflection and investigation, is dealt with in Whitley's discussion of impulse control. In conclusion I wish again to express my appreciation not only for the way that Mr. Whitley has sorted out the various views on secularization and dealt with the issues they raise, but for the way in which his essay stimulates further thought about the nature of social change.