FROM THE SECULAR CITY TO CIVIL RELIGION

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It seems a lot longer ago than seven years when Harvey Cox's, *The Secular City*,[1] appeared in print. Cox has since gone on to other things, choosing not to defend what he wrote in that work. The enthusiasm about secularization and technology which characterized *The Secular City* and discussions of it has given way in many quarters to disillusionment. The hopeful attitude about increasing freedom from dependence on traditional religion has been replaced by the nagging suspicion that we may be dependent on newer and different, but no less binding nor any more liberating, deities. Few doubt that something labelled "secularization," whatever it means, is taking place; but the vagueness of the term and either euphoria or despair about what it portends, have inhibited fruitful discussion. Now that the ideological polemic about secularization has abated somewhat yet concern about the phenomena of secularization remains this is a particularly opportune moment to give fresh consideration to this concept.

It is for this reason as well as the clarity and substance of the content of Read Whitley's monograph on "Secularization and Culture Change" that I welcome his contribution and am grateful for an opportunity to respond. Fortunately, since I approach these issues from the discipline of ethics, particularly religious ethics, Whitley has provided numerous openings for dialogue between sociology and ethics on the concept of secularization. Ethics is crucially dependent on the work of social scientists for an adequate grasp of the dynamics of social change. Whitley's exceedingly thorough and illuminating research on secularization as one tool for understanding change is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of our social context and the attendant problems and possibilities for affecting qualitative social change. In my response I shall be concerned with some of the ethical issues and implications of Whitley's essay, seeking to show how research on secularization is significant for ethics and what kinds of evaluative considerations ethics is concerned with in examining secularization.

One crucial step in a reassessment of secularization is provided by Whitley in his position that secularization should not be tied to the assumption of a secular-religious dichotomy. His model based on the

[1]Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965).

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work of Howard Becker is an extremely helpful means for understanding secularization and establishing a basis for empirical study on the concept. I shall accept this model as a springboard for a quick plunge into an ethical analysis of American society. Then, as suggested by the title of this response, I shall examine the ethical significance of the civil religion thesis in the study of both the socio-structural and noetic-epistemological manifestations of secularization that Whitley examines in the latter part of his monograph. The basic thrust of my response is to urge further study on the thesis that traditional religious systems are being replaced in American society by the civil religion of the American techno-society[2] which functions to expand opportunities for increasing material comfort for many while shutting off opportunities for social structural change that would benefit the outsiders, those who are the victims of social injustice and outside the sphere of the distribution of technological rewards.

If we begin with the suggestion that secular society refers to the readiness of its members to change along a scale from principial to pronormless, it is appropriate to ask if American society is secular and, if so, which of these categories most accurately describes the character of its secularity. It is important to emphasize that an adequate answer needs to be found through the kind of empirical study that Whitley believes is possible and desirable. But, for the time being, I shall suggest that there is substantial impressionistic evidence that would locate American society at an advanced stage of secularization typified on Becker's scale as readiness to change for that which will provide comfort. One indicator of the values by which Americans live, if not ones they explicitly articulate and profess, is advertising. Advertising interpreted as a reflector of operative American values points to the dominance of luxury and personal pleasure in a scale of values. If advertisers are correct in their diagnosis of American values, a marked readiness to change in the quest for comfort overrides proverbial, prescriptive and principial consideration. According to the criterion of comfort, then, it would appear that American society is highly secular.

This interpretation would be further amplified by Whitley's discussion of Apollonianism. Whitley points out that as technology extends and distributes its rewards to members of society there is a decreasing need for Apollonianism as a source of impulse control. The implication is that as technology through its distribution of rewards makes ever new actualizations and promises of comfort available to its members proverbial and prescriptive restraints to change and prin-

[2]The term "techno-society" and its significance is analyzed in Gibson Winter, *Being Free.* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970).

cipial controls on change become less and less effective. We no longer need God or his functional equivalent to control our insatiable appetites or fulfill our unsatisfied longings because technology provides them quite well, thank you. Furthermore, since the quest for comfort is a primarily private pursuit we no longer have need of ethical foundations that seek to secure a measure of mutual responsibility among members of society because these foundations may inhibit personal drives for enjoying the comfortable rewards which technology makes possible. At this level the views of Cox and van Leeuwen[3] among others that secularization and technology go hand in hand to open up possibilities for change seems confirmed.

This is obviously not the whole story, however; for the rub comes when one perceives that although secularization involves the readiness to change, and that although secularization may free us from dependence upon traditional religious deities, openness to change is of a particular sort rather than across the board. Readiness to change for the sake of comfort does not necessarily include, indeed it may exclude, readiness to change the social, political and economic structures which perpetuate racism, poverty and other types of social injustice. It is commonplace in critiques of technology to comment upon the difficulty of accomplishing structural change that will maximize the rewards of technology for all the society's members. Instead, technology's rewards are distributed to some; these are the ones who are "free" to pursue the comfortable life. But these are precisely the ones who are threatened by the demands of the "outsiders" for change in the structures of society. Hence, we are left with a far more complex and ambiguous assessment of secularization in American society than might be apparent at first glance. Whereas there may be marked willingness to change in one area (for the sake of personal comfort), there may be marked resistance to change in another area (structures that would distribute more equitably technology's rewards).

Would it not then be important in empirical research upon Becker's model to differentiate between various types or areas of change? Within Becker's model one may discover that both proverbial and pronormless characteristics are present in American society, proverbial in loyalty to the structures of American society and the values that undergird them and pronormless in the personal pursuit of comfort. The proverbial and pronormless may function quite well together so long as American technology makes comfortable rewards possible and loyalty to American structures rewards members with new actualiza-

[3]Arend van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

tions of comfort. This is perhaps the appropriate place to consider the significance of the civil religion thesis to the discussion of secularization because civil religion may function to maintain harmony between the proverbial and the pronormless.

There does not appear to be much debate on the point that traditional world views and religious dogmas are no longer of central importance in shaping man's view of himself in the world. But if they are not, what is? Whitley raises what seems to me to be an extremely important qeustion when he asks what the contemporary functional equivalents or functional alternatives to traditional church religion might be. Furthermore, he indicates that there is both a social-structural and a subjective dimension to the disintegration of traditional world views and emerging objectified meaning systems. I strongly support Whitley's call for more empirical research on these matters. What functions for persons as potent symbols by which they understand themselves, perceive their environment and make their responses? How are meaning systems institutionalized and is there anything approaching an institutionalized meaning system that provides the basis for social cohesion?

The current discussion about civil religion is pertinent to the study of these questions. Robert Bellah, in his much debated essay, "Civil Religion in America,"[4] has argued that civil religion is a functional equivalent or functional alternative to traditional religious belief systems, at least in the public arena. Bellah maintains that America has from its beginning understood itself and its relation to the world in a collection of religious beliefs, symbols and rituals. Civil religion is not to be deplored as such. In fact, at its best American civil religion attests to a religious reality that transcends the American nation and locates the nation in a universal context. However, the Vietnam experience has raised serious questions about the capacity of civil religion to place the American nation under a higher judgment than itself and to perceive a more appropriate relation to other nations of the world.

I do not intend to raise critical questions about Bellah's thesis here but to suggest that American civil religion as a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals institutionalized in American life may be the chief socio-structural alternative to traditional church religion. The institutionalization of civil religion in American life may provide a functional system of meaning for the individual's participation in society and a normative system for social cohesion. Numerous commentators on the

[4]Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 3 - 23 in W. G. McLoughlin and R. N. Bellah, eds., *Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

church have pointed to the comfortable harmony between church members' appropriation of the church creed and the American creed. The suspicion is not new that traditional church religion, although peripheral in significance to members and the larger society, plays a supportive, accommodating role to the far more significant role of civil religion. It may be that the seeming pluralism in the social-structural dimensions of meaning systems that Berger and Luckmann refer to is less significant than the cohesive impact of widespread personal allegiance to and participation in civil religion.

If this thesis about the significance of civil religion in American society is correct, it helps to explain further the coexistence of the proverbial and pronormless responses to change. The resistance to change in social structures is strengthened and justified by civil religion's tenets concerning the particular wisdom and virtue embodied in American institutions. At the same time readiness to change in the direction of greater comfort is strengthened and justified by the expectation that loyalty to civil religion will not and should not go unrewarded. Allegiance to civil religion solidifies and reinforces the individual's relation to the existing social structures while it also brings the individual more tangible rewards than traditional religions ever could. Hence, it is highly plausible to me that the institutionalization of civil religion provides the most persuasive and potent socio-structural alternative to traditional church religion and that the strength of civil religion helps account for the complexity in seeking to interpret secularization in America according to Becker's model. The crucial social ethical question that emerges out of these comments about secularization and civil religion is the possibility for overcoming gross injustices in American society when the forces for resisting structural change accompanied by forces for achieving ever higher plateaus of comfort work so effectively to block qualitative change. The possibility that civil religion undergirds, sustains and justifies those forces makes the prospects for changing unjust structures seem even more bleak. I shall make some more hopeful comments later, but our experience in recent years in trying to affect change in social structures and policies has been more than sufficiently disappointing to push us to understand the sources of our difficulty.

One further linkage between the civil religion thesis and Whitley's examination of secularization needs to be made. Even if civil religion provides symbols, beliefs and institutions which relate the individual to society, does civil religion also affect to any significant extent the subjective dimension of personal existence? As traditional religions lose their effectiveness in shaping subjective consciousness, what sym-

bols provide an equivalent function in contemporary life? It is possible but by no means certain that the symbols of civil religion shape the subjective consciousness as well as the socio-structural dimension of personal existence. It is also highly possible that those "systems of 'ultimate' significance" which shape the consciousness of persons today are numerous and highly privatized as Whitley suggests and not necessarily tied to traditional religious systems or to American civil religion. If this last suggestion is the correct one, the implications for social ethics are not very different than they would be if civil religion were significant for individual consciousness; for privatized symbol systems would have little direct bearing upon the ordering of society and could quite harmoniously coexist with a symbol system of civil religion as the basis of social structures and policies. This gap between the public and private dimensions of personal existence has been noted many times before in studies of religious ethics. One ethical system pertains to the public sphere while a quite different one pertains to the private sphere. President Nixon can declare himself a pacifist yet pursue a policy of war without recognizing any inconsistency. The implications of Whitley's study is that the gap between public and private will continue and perhaps widen. The resulting problematic for the enterprise of social ethics is again apparent.

I shall conclude with reflections on how the critical and constructive tasks of ethics pertain to this analysis of secularization and civil religion. The critical task lies in vigorously critiquing the tenets and impact of civil religion insofar as it sanctions and reinforces an unjust ordering of civil society. Continuing concentration on the outmoded and irrelevant character of traditional religion (which we seem to agree is not very significant anyway in either the public or the private arena) rather than upon the functional potency of civil religion may be akin to throwing a runner out at second base while the winning run is scoring from third base. When allegiance to civil religion brings great resistance to change in social structures and when individual consciousness is increasingly privatized and hence unrelated to social responsibility, the conditions are present for the dominance of techno-society over public life and increased pursuit of comfort for the privileged without regard for those who suffer the pain of injustice.

The constructive task of ethics is surely not to attempt to resurrect outdated world views or traditional religious belief systems. In the public arena we may begin with Bellah's suggestion that American civil religion at best may be a significant force for national self-criticism and qualitative change. In a recent book, James Sellers has made a similar point. In Sellers' view, contemporary social ethics concerned

with shaping the public sector needs to recognize the dialectical character of America's moral tradition, casting aside those elements that contribute to destructive features of American domestic and foreign policy and laying hold of those elements which will enable us to cope with the crises of our day.[5] The constructive task then is to locate the moral traditions and experience of the history of the American people that can provide a normative structure for meeting the challenges of social justice and international community.

On the subjective level, the task may be as Langdon Gilkey has argued in *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language,* to provide potent symbolic forms which speak meaningfully to contemporary human existence.[6] Gilkey contends that neither traditional religious symbols nor the secular spirit addresses convincingly man's felt existence. It may be that the pervasive pluralism of which Whitley speaks can be interpreted as the contemporary struggle for new symbols to replace the old as convincing interpretations of man's being in the world and as bases for his responses to the world. With the emerging of something like a consensus on a view of man as a social self,[7] it would appear that only symbolic forms which illumine the character of personhood in community and thereby provide a framework of interpretation that binds together personal existence, interpersonal relationships and justice within the larger human community is adequate for shaping a qualitatively better future. According to this interpretation, the privatization, though not necessarily the pluralism, of symbolic forms is judged as inadequate for coping with the communal dimension of human existence. The constructive opportunity for those who still place themselves within a particular religious tradition is then to contribute to the development of symbolic forms which at the public level of social structures and subjective level of consciousness provide bases for human freedom and responsibility in community.

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[5]James Sellers, *Public Ethics.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 209-236.

[6]Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language.* (New York: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1969), pp. 247-304.

[7]John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 60-67.

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