

SECULARIZATION: SOME PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN TAKING A STAND

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Probably one of the strongest and simultaneously most vulnerable features of the human intellect is its capacity for self-criticism. Encounters with the world including oneself are never-ending. Even after death there is always someone who will take that left to posterity by the deceased and interpret and apply such content anew. Via such a process the classical absolute and unchanging idealism of the sacred would seem to have been largely supplanted by the relativistic idealism of a contemporary social-scientific and theological *Weltanschauung*. Indeed it may well be that the only constant thing is change and all we can afford is a lament for a past time and images of security and stability which we are forced to recognize never were as we conceptualize them. Thus it is that Whitley takes us on a scholarly excursion through that ideological debate of the sacred versus the secular. Few topics show us as clearly that our ideas and theories and their derivative research represent less of individualism than of a cultural heritage and social place. Considering the erudition which Whitley has brought to bear upon the themes of the sacred and secular, it will be the aim of this paper to selectively reinforce some of these and to expand upon others, the overall purpose being to support the need for ever-broadening perspectives such as underlie what Whitley has introduced.

Systems and Values. Whether they be individual ideas or actions or social movements and issues which encompass entire societies, transaction and relationship are necessarily present. C. Wright Mills claims that the success and failure of individual men and women are a problem of history; the context is therefore concurrently historical, socio-cultural and psychological.¹ In brief we are dealing with contexts within contexts all of which are referable to levels of the historical-sociocultural system within which we carry out our labors.² Given the assumption of a reality across persons within situations which situations are resultants of broader historical-cultural forces, conceptualizations such as sacred and secular must be seen as conditioned by the objective political, economic and social character of times and places. The latter are mediated by value systems—those about which we theorize utilizing those with which we theorize. As Kelman notes “value assumptions

¹Mills, C. W. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford, 1959, p. 3.

²von Bertalanffy, L., *General System Theory*. New York: George Braziller, 1968. Buckley, W. *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

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are so thoroughly built into the structure of reality that it does not occur to us to question them and to entertain the possibility of alternative assumptions."³ At this juncture such an alternative seems worthwhile to pose. Is the distinction of sacred-secular overdrawn and largely invalid? Can the hypothesis be reasonably entertained that the emphasis placed on it has been magnified to realize various ideological purposes? The same criticism may, of course, be applied to explain the treatment of this problem offered here.

Problems of Definition and Connotation: It is clear that the language and terminology of the "Sacred and secular" immediately call to mind the involvement of religion relative to society. Shiner specifically discusses these terms in such perspective.⁴ Reduction is fundamentally to polar extremes, a secular and a sacred, no matter how these are dignified and seemingly qualified. In contrast Becker explicitly utilizes the concept of sacred to encompass "far more than the religious."⁵ This view is even further developed by Vernon whose descriptions of sacred and secular society really don't require any reference to religion, though such is included.⁶

The "flexibility" manifested in denoting the sacred and the secular obviously has its connotative aspects. Definition places one in a position to respond with the "cognitive presuppositions of a secularized view of reality" or of a sacralized view.⁷ But this can be further refined to purvey the values of a social order legitimated by religion. Witness this possibility when Gouldner and Peterson apply social exchange theory ideas to human relationships regardless of the cultural setting and one might infer the acceptance of such views by Whitley.⁸ The legitimation of these rules by religion is not questioned here so much as the rules themselves which seem particularly appropriate to a social order such as ours that is based upon themes of individualism, and economic hedonism.⁹ Other societies in which competitive individualistic self-aggrandizement is either lacking or played down may utilize the sacred to legitimate non-market cooperative relational patterns.

³Kelman, H. C., *A time to Speak*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1968, p. 72.

⁴Shiner, L., "The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 1967, 6, 207-220.

⁵Becker, H., "Current Sacred-Secular Theory and its Development," in Becker, H. and Boskoff, A. (Eds.), *Modern Sociological Theory*. New York: Dryden, 1957, 113-185, p. 142.

⁶Vernon, G. M., *Sociology of Religion*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962, pp. 202-210.

⁷Whitley, O. R., "Secularization and Culture Change: An Approach to Understanding Changing Systems of Religious Belief," chap. V.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Homans, G. C., *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961. See also entire issue of *Sociological Inquiry*, 1964, 34, especially the article by M. Deutsch.

The plot further thickens when the sacred as a religious term is applied generally to societies where religion may or may not be present. In other words, our assumed universality of religion has been questioned though the critique of universality has not gotten the recognition it merits.¹⁰ No one can play down the significance of religion in a social order, but to construct general rules that cover different societies without reference to other qualifying structures, may be asking too much. Religion may indeed perform radically different functions in different sociocultural milieus.

Up to this point religion has been presented as unitary when in actuality it is multiform in nature. Much evidence suggests that there is, at least in Western Culture, a developmental process which must be considered, and this growth pattern emphasizes different facets of the religio-spiritual enterprise during the course of its evolution. O'Dea eloquently presents the details of this journey from a time of inspiration to one of institutionalization.¹¹ The formalization of faith in organization may be argued as one form of secularization, but it is not inappropriate to suggest that many representatives of the religious establishment are among those who decry the secularization of culture the loudest. In these instances mixed motivations and vested power may often be more the spur to their actions than inner commitment to the tenets of their faith. Secularization must therefore be analyzed in relation to the inspirational and institutional aspects of religion.

The further complexities of analysis from the spiritual side can be seen when one examines the still rather vaguely defined concept of secularization with regard to the behavioral and phenomenological elements of religion. The systems of Glock and Fukuyama illustrate these possible referents.¹² Without defining such, a simple listing of some of the concepts should suffice. Glock, for example, speaks of the dimensions of belief, practice, knowledge, experience and consequences, while Fukuyama cites four overlapping categories.

What all of this leads to is the proposal that the concept of secularization is ambiguous since that of the sacred lacks clarity. Being anti-religious, counter- or a-religious seems to infer secularization. The empirical is usually obscured when what we ultimately need to carry on this conversation is reference to operations and their detailed

¹⁰Cohn, W., "Is Religion Universal? The Problem of Definition," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1962, 2, 25-33.

¹¹O'Dea, T. F., "Five Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1961, 1, 30-39. See also O'Dea, T. F., *The sociology of religion*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1966, 55-97.

¹²Glock, C. Y., "On the Study of Religious Commitment," *Religious Education Research Supplement*, 1962, S-98 through S-110, and Fukuyama, Y. The major dimensions of church membership. *Review of Religious Research*, 1961, 2, 154-16.

definition. Clearly we do have definitions of what I have easily referred to as "anti-religious, counter- or a-religious."

Another aspect of this last point concerns the rather well established tie between functional theory in Sociology and the role of religion within a society. This must be qualified by asking what functions are performed, for whom, and according to what criteria. To quote Marx, religion may indeed be on one level of function, "the heart of a heartless world" but on another "the opium of the people."¹³ Religion is therefore both functional and dysfunctional relative to different aspects of social structure and depending on whether short or long-term goals are embraced.

Sacred and Secular in Cultural Perspective. To place the sacred-secular distinction within what is believed here to be its proper context, we must first assume, independent of any question of the fundamental validity of faith, that the social order is primary and the religious order is secondary. We now stand with what Whitley notes from Berger and Luckmann are the "cognitive presuppositions of a secularized view of reality."¹⁴ This position stresses the view that conceptual magnifications such as the notion of "sacred society" are both erroneous and misplaced. First, the sacred is theorized to be of significance within socio-psychological contexts primarily for its secular import. Novak thus avers that "... the astute reader of theological discourse will soon discover that every sentence in such discourse . . . refers to human actions, or dispositions, or programs . . . Theology studies ultimate visions of communal relationships and personal identity insofar as these affect actual human experience."¹⁵ Given the initial assumption, all of this states that "sacred society" is really secular in scope and to abstract the sacred from the secular frequently results in distinctions which serve either purely intellectual or ideological purposes. Sacred, too often, then refers to "primitive and preliterate" people who are not plagued by the anomie and alienation of "civilized" societies.¹⁶ In its most undeveloped anti-intellectual form, we find ourselves confronting a lament for an orderly, minimally threatening image of the world and life—a longing for that "old-time security." In human terms, the sacred society is described by reference to positive social relationships, personality integration, family identity and loyalty, while secular society embodies the opposite—anonymity, specialization, isolation and conflict.¹⁷ Questions are rarely asked about the de-

¹³Marx, K. quoted in Stracey, J., *The Theory and Practice of Socialism*. New York: Random House, 1936, p. 233.

¹⁴Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁵Novak, M., "Secular Saints," *The Center Magazine*, 1968, 1, No. 4, 51-58, p. 52.

¹⁶Vernon, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

¹⁷Vernon, *op. cit.*, p. 202-206.

humanization of a rigid, caste-like cultural order, the legitimization of despotic power, poverty and disease, inequity and the like.

In responding to Shiner, Whitley notes both the superiority of Becker's view of social change and that one need not see "the movements from sacred to secular society (as) a movement from 'good' to 'bad'," but unfortunately, in the view of this writer, despite the best intentions such is what subtly occurs.¹⁸ The problem is, however, never one of "methodological theoretical, and empirical questions," but always one of "value questions."¹⁹ Incautiously, perhaps, what is being espoused here is not to "abandon the theory of secularization," but to see the secular as primary and the sacred as expressing the secular in the domain of social and cultural value maintenance and change.²⁰ The shift from sacred to secular explanations is really, on the sociocultural level, a change among patterns of institutionally useful arrangements as social, political and economic forces and agents find that religious legitimations are less and less compelling. Tawney's classical work, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* and Niebuhr's, *Social Sources of Denominationalism* illustrate these tendencies well.²¹ Still man's struggle for personal significance via the sacred continues though oftentimes for the wrong reasons.

Secularization as change in power orientations. Whitley's desire to place the sacred-secular distinction within the broader structure of a theory of social change is supported here by this attempted reduction of the sacred to a manifestation of the secular when a sociocultural framework is adopted. The construction of ideal types such as a sacred and secular societies is not, however, felt to be of much use since denotational criteria for such a distinction have to be unrealistically narrow. Since Becker's conception of sacred covers much that is not explicitly religious, it leaves the door wide open to inclusion of that denoted as secular. The sacred-secular dichotomy can no longer be maintained if Becker's definition is accepted.²²

Secularization, from the religious-institutional point of view, might be interpreted as seeking explanations primarily in the realm of existence not transcendence. The history of our own civilization suggests a strong trend in this direction. The parallel growth of individualism, industrialism, technology, and science with their social and political implications have made transcendental explanatory reference less and less comprehensible. The contemporary stress is more on materialism,

¹⁸Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 19f.

²¹Tawney, R. H., *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. New York: Harcourt, 1926 and Niebuhr, H. R., *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Meridan, 1957.

²²Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

freedom and pragmatism. To paraphrase Becker, these goals are now "respected, venerated, and inviolable."²³

Apparently the influence of institutional religion in everyday life has reduced, or stated differently, it no longer possesses the power it once had. In fact insight may be gained into the processes of social change in this controversy by briefly noting the shifts that have occurred over time in power relative to a religious base in our society. French and Raven provide a useful entre to this discussion by positing five kinds of power-reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert.²⁴

The reward power of faith would seem to have been supplanted by the actual rewards, or material advantage rather than the promissory possibilities implied in religion. Still, for many individuals, there is considerable gratification and comfort that accrues from their individual commitment to a spiritual framework. Secular reward power does, however, appear to dominate.

The coercive power of religion is markedly reduced over what it was in the past. Even then churches had to marshal social and political forces to enforce their will as they often lacked such power. In an individualistically oriented social order, the collective-coercive power of religion is most likely to decline.

Obviously religion still possesses much legitimating power, but even this has receded to more and more abstract and distant appeals as the legitimate power of science and government among other agencies increases.

It is hypothesized here that legitimating power is called upon today for ideological purposes. This is the "God is on our side" argument, and in a culture such as ours with more than its share of anomie and resulting alienation, the ideological utilization of faith cannot be taken lightly. Its force, however, is not what it once was. This is more than amply testified to by the data reported by Herberg which indicates that the majority of those who consider religion "very important" in their lives, see that it remains independent of their views and behaviors in everyday life.²⁵

In like manner referent power, that which supports identification, hence personal and social identity, has less effect. People shift surprisingly easily from one church and doctrine to another, or simply from formal religion to a civil religion or none at all. Lastly the expert power inherent in the sacred has been deferred to the scientist and the pragmatist.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴French, J. R. P. and Raven, B., "The Bases of Social Power," in Cartwright, D. (Ed.), *Studies in social power*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1959, 150-167.

²⁵Herberg, W., *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1960.

This very succinct treatment of power relative to secularization could be expanded quite easily. In addition, similar handling could be afforded other facets of social and cultural structure. To understand how that designated as sacred (in the restrictive religious sense) has been defined and modified relative to the secular, analysis will have to proceed along lines such as these. The legitimating and control features of the institutional sacred should then be seen as primarily serving the secular domain. In this context, the ideological role of the sacred should also become evident. A more definitive concept of the sacred, especially in its individual and phenomenological aspects, may be expected to develop. The inspirational sacred could then be constructively distinguished from the institutional sacred with the former demonstrating its stimulus value for positive social change while the latter is shown to represent largely sociocultural forces supporting existing structures.

Summary and Conclusions: What has been claimed here, and hopefully demonstrated, is first that the sacred-secular distinction is overdrawn. Second, the distinction seems less to explain changes over time than to serve as an ideological rallying cry for advocates of various social or political positions.

This controversy, as Whitley notes, should be located within a theory of social change. We clearly need a fuller understanding of the transactions of individual and collective faith with sociocultural forces. In the last analysis, the most difficult of all may be finding operational equivalents to our abstractions.

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