

The Myth of the Twentieth Century The Rise and Fall of Secularization

Harvey G. COX

Obituaries about famous—and less famous—persons usually tend to be eulogic and certainly do not leave much doubt that the person in question indeed passed away. Obituaries about famous—and less famous—concepts and theories in the human and social sciences, however, are often of a different nature. Not only are they frequently critical of their subject matter, but they are often liable, paradoxically, to create doubts as to whether its supposed demise is after all so certain a fact. The article on “the rise and fall of secularization” by Harvey Cox that follows might well be a case in point. Far from closing a debate in the sociological study of religion—what it apparently purports to do—it rather stirs up renewed discussion about how to read our present time and the role religion plays in it.

Harvey Cox is not unknown in Japan. A guru of the secularization theory in the 1960s, the American Christian theologian Cox was admittedly, together with many other colleagues in the field, instrumental in awakening the attention of sociologists of religion all over the world to the fate of religion in what was universally acknowledged as a new age in human history. “Secularization” was the buzzword, and sociologists of religion in Japan also jumped on the bandwagon. Even if they claimed that their enthusiasm for dealing with this subject was constantly mixed with hesitancy and caution, for many reasons, they did participate in the debate quite wholeheartedly. This journal also was one of the exponents of this trend; its most notable expression being the publication in a special issue (March–June 1979, 6/1–2) of the “Proceedings

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of the 1978 Tokyo Meeting of the *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse*,” which indeed was focused upon the secularization debate. We should of course also mention that many other articles in the *JJRS* referred to the topic.

This time Cox is back on the scene debunking what he calls the “myth of the twentieth century”; yet, interestingly enough, he sees “more continuity than discontinuity between [his] earlier work on the theology of secularization, especially as it was voiced in *The Secular City* (first published in 1965), and [his] current work on the theological significance of new religious movements.” His arguments for claiming a religious revival that gives the lie to secularization are very powerful. While he refers mainly to his recent work on the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, he also mentions in this respect the rapid spread of Islam and—although briefly—what he perceives as a certain revitalization of Shinto in Japan. Of course, Cox is not alone in arguing this way. Moreover, we should not forget that, even from the very beginning of the debate on secularization, voices were already raised which sounded like those we are hearing now, including the proposal that the concept of secularization should be eliminated from sociological language. Nothing indeed is new under the sun! In this connection we should perhaps mention that the latest issue of *Sociology of Religion*, the quarterly review of the (American) Association for the Sociology of Religion (vol. 60/3, Fall 1999), is completely devoted to the secularization debate. It contains obituaries of secularization—in terms that are still stronger than those Cox uses, such as Rodney Stark’s “Secularization, R.I.P.” It also contains, however, very powerful defenses of the concept and the theory, proving again that the debate is far from closed. Moreover, while many Japanese scholars keep repeating that whether or not “secularization” was an appropriate concept for understanding the relationship between Western society and religion, it is so culture-bound that its cross-cultural applicability should be deeply questioned. This is true even today as not a few young Japanese students of religion have chosen it as their theme of research. Admittedly, their voices are mostly critical, but it shows again that the debate itself is still going on, in Japan as well as elsewhere.

Nobody can deny the claim that in the past thirty or forty years the secularization thesis has indeed functioned as a sort of myth in the minds of many people, scholars of religion and society included. This is certainly the case when the thesis was propounded in terms of the decline of religion. Yet, academic honesty requires us to admit that more is involved here. In the secularization debate, gradually a process of conceptual refinement took place that aimed to more clearly define what the concept actually signified and, especially, what it did not. Unfortunately—or is it unavoidable?—even in this process of refinement, quite many

misunderstandings arose. Some were simply the result of that eternal problem of whether and to what extent objectivity in reading reality and in expressing it in concepts and theories is possible. Others were due to the fact that the whole debate indeed straddled the domains of philosophy, theology, and the social sciences, creating more than a little confusion in the minds of some people. (Harvey Cox's dealing with the subject might be one of the best examples of this mixing of approaches.) And, if it might be said, still other misunderstandings were apparently caused by a conscious, or unconscious, negligence among scholars in earnestly listening to each other's arguments. (Something similar is nowadays also taking place with regard to the concept and theory of "globalization," the new buzzword!) All this has also been true in Japan. Apart from the question of whether secularization itself has been a myth or not, it has sometimes looked as if secularization necessarily had to mean "decline of religion," and this latter interpretation became a sort of myth. However, an attentive reading of what most Japanese scholars wrote on "religion in a secularized society" reveals that they were very much aware of the subtle difficulties the debate implied. Perhaps all of us have to do our homework and reread from time to time what now is considered "outdated stuff"

A last point is this: When the secularization thesis was introduced in Japan some thirty or forty years ago, its relevance for sociological research on religion in this country was acknowledged with "hesitancy and caution." That was a time when Japanese scholars became increasingly aware that they should no longer blindly rely on Western concepts and theories for dealing with the role of religion in their own society. Since then, contacts between Japanese scholars and colleagues in other countries of the world have steadily increased, and this journal too has endeavored to promote them. Moreover, while the awareness of cultural differences has deepened, there also has been at the same time the growing interconnectedness and mutual influencing of cultural trends—indeed an aspect of globalization—that have become undeniable facts of life. In this connection, also the debate on secularization, including both its alleged mythical nature and the problem of the cross-cultural applicability of its conceptual framework, cannot but gain a renewed relevance. The reader is of course totally free to agree or disagree with Cox's concluding statement that "the myth of secularization is dead." Ultimately history will prove the correctness of that obituary. Yet, what in my opinion is certainly not dead is the debate itself on secularization and on the obituaries Cox and others write about it. In our globalizing world, interpreters of Japanese society and religion are more than ever before called to join in this debate, let us hope this time with less hesitancy and caution.

Jan Suygedouw

... History may be servitude,
 History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
 The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
 To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

— T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, as the nineteenth century ended, predictions of what the twentieth would hold were varied and often contradictory. Some prophesied the final disappearance of religion, ignorance, and superstition. Others confidently predicted a Christian century, and some American Protestants even christened a new magazine with that name. A hundred years later, both these forecasts appear to have been wrong. This essay inquires into the career of one idea that became a touchstone for both the theology and the cultural criticism of the twentieth century. Indeed, it became for some the single most comprehensive explanatory myth of its era. What became of that myth and the reality it was supposed to illuminate? The myth, of course, is secularization.

Max Weber initiated the discussion by suggesting that although Calvinism had provided the original value foundation for modernity, the religious substance was being displaced by the very worldview it had spawned. This revolution was devouring not its children but its parents. Then, throughout the twentieth century, students of large-scale social change saw religion and modernization within a kind of zero-sum equation: the more modernization, the less religion. The larger the role religion played, it was held, the less chance modernization—which was widely held to be a desirable process—had to bestow its benefits. Conversely, the more modernization with its subversion of traditional patterns, urbanization, high mobility, and technical rationality, the more religion, including the religion that had laid the groundwork for modernity, would be undercut and marginalized. Modernization and secularization were both the offsprings and the murderers of religion. Weber was the clearest proponent of this view. Religion was seen to play the role of John the Baptist to modernization’s Messiah: preparing the way, but then pointing its long, bony finger and announcing, “I must decrease; he must increase.”

Today this zero-sum construction seems entirely implausible. Religion has not only survived, it has even thrived in some of the most modernized areas of the world. There is every indication that in many places it has even continued to stimulate the modernization process.

Japan, for example, is possibly in some ways the most “modern” society in the world. Few other countries can boast taxi doors that open by themselves. By most criteria, however, Japan can hardly be thought of as a secular society today. Both local and state Shinto are undergoing a certain revitalization, to the dismay of democrats, Buddhists, and Christians who view this development with alarm. The so-called new religious movements continue to proliferate, in part (some observers say) precisely because they enable people to cope effectively with the dislocation of modernization. In Africa, Latin America, and Asia both Christianity, mainly in its Pentecostal form, and other new religious movements—which are often creative adaptations of traditional religions—are burgeoning. In the United States itself, religion, though changing in important ways, is hardly in decline. In the so-called Third World, some traditional and many innovative religious movements appear to prosper. Only Europe, some claim, is an exception to this global process. But even that is not clear. Is religion, in a characteristically “European” way perhaps, also making a comeback there? Paradoxically, by some standards the world may be even less secular at the end of the twentieth century than it was at the beginning. How are we to explain the dramatic failure of the secularization thesis as an explanatory paradigm for religion, culture, and politics in the twentieth century? Where does that leave us as theologians of culture at the beginning of the twenty-first?

Religious revival, unlike some other large-scale cultural trends, often begins on the periphery and only subsequently works its way to the center. This has happened time and time again in the history of the several religions. The Israelites were never a major power in the ancient world. Jesus came from an outlying province. The Mecca in which Mahomet was born was not at that time a leading city. Spiritual energy, it seems, comes from “the bottom and the edges.” The current Islamic resurgence began in the slums of Cairo and other Middle-Eastern cities. The “base communities” of South America generated the energy for liberation theology. The fastest-growing Christian groups in the world today are probably the Pentecostal/charismatic ones, which began in the poorer sections of cities and still grow most quickly there. Some observers forecast that by AD 2010, Pentecostals will account for one of every three Christians in the world. Why such phenomenal growth?

The pattern of growth tells us something important about religion and secularization. Pentecostals, though they are theologically and culturally very different from Weber’s worldly ascetic Puritans, generate a functional equivalent to the work ethic that makes them particularly

well suited to certain features of modernization. This may help explain why Pentecostalism is growing most dramatically in regions and among classes that are not yet in the mainstream. For example, there are already nearly 400,000 Pentecostals in Sicily. But in that epitome of traditional Catholic, patriarchal, southern European culture, the Pentecostal movement is often associated (in the traditionalist mind and quite unfavorably) with women. In particular, it is associated with the women who opt out of the existing religious culture, often against the express wishes of husbands and fathers, to become healers and prophetesses. Studies have shown that Pentecostal sermons and testimonies in Sicily markedly alter existing patriarchal images of God, emphasizing God as lover and companion. It will be important to notice whether the growth in other parts of the world of this movement will have an effect not just on the roles traditionally assigned to women in more conservative areas but on the hegemonic religious symbol system itself.

In France, on the other hand, the charismatic movement (a milder form of Pentecostalism) has appeared within the educated-technical classes, a sector not usually considered "marginal." Why? Perhaps in part because these people must spend so much time immersed in the flat, homogeneous "language" of the computer world. For them, the charismatic practice of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) provides an alternative, emotionally rich but less denotative idiom for expressing human emotion. It could be a protest against the technological reduction of language.

The vigor and expansion of new religious movements often create both collisions and fusions with "modern" societies. For example, the rapid spread of Islam in Europe through immigration is forcing people to rethink long-cherished notions about church and state and the proper place of religion in culture. The debate assumes different forms in different places. The result of the famous conflict in France about whether Muslim girls were to be allowed to wear scarves to school indicated that French officials were reluctant to allow what they saw as ethnic differences to assume a religious coloration. True to a secularist tradition dating back to the Revolution, religion is supposed to be a strictly *private* affair, but schools are *public*.

Islam, unlike Pentecostalism, provides a difficult test for prevailing definitions of religious liberty in liberal societies. Pentecostals separate faith from state power even more emphatically than most traditional Protestant denominations. It would be hard to imagine an established or specially favored Pentecostal church comparable to the Anglican or Lutheran churches of the United Kingdom or Scandi-

navia. In Islam, though there are clear ideas about religious tolerance in the Quran, discussions about a Muslim equivalent to the liberal conception of separation of church and state are just beginning. But such a development will need to recognize that in Islam, the faith is expected to guide the polity and inform the culture. There are other religious and ethical considerations that make the integration of Muslims into Western societies more problematical than that of previous waves of immigrants. Among these are differences in marriage laws and beliefs about the proper age for women to marry, as well as whether boys and girls should be educated together.

The situation is different in the United Kingdom, where some people have begun to notice the logical inconsistency of providing tax support for Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish schools but not for the country's growing Muslim population. These conflicts will soon become a matter of public debate. The result could be ironical. It could force a recognition that we are moving neither into a secular nor a Christian century but into a pluriform one. For example, if in order to prevent public funding for Islamic schools, the United Kingdom should reverse tradition and give up all public support for confessional education, then the society would have taken a long step into a kind of secularization most Britons firmly reject. On the other hand, if Muslim schools, and then eventually other religious schools, are accepted and publicly supported, it would mark a step toward a *de jure* as well as a *de facto* religiously *pluralistic* (not secularized) culture.

In many places in eastern and western Europe today, churches established for centuries either in culture or in law are now facing a much more radically pluralistic and therefore competitive situation. There is every indication that various forms of Pentecostalism and evangelical Protestantism will burgeon in some areas of the former Soviet Union. Some years ago an American religious magazine featured on its cover a picture of well-groomed, young Southern Baptist missionaries handing out Russian-language Bibles both to the crews of the tanks surrounding the Russian white house during the August coup and to the people picketing them. The smiles on the faces of both groups of recipients suggested they seemed pleased. This response is a matter of grave concern to the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, which has pushed for laws to guarantee its hegemony if not its monopoly.

In many places in Europe today, one gets the distinct impression that although the *institutional* forms of religions may be weaker than they once were, religion still plays a strong role in public culture. References and allusions appear in widely disparate places such as in

poetry and drama, in film, in political debates, and even in popular music. Pope John Paul II's avowed hope for the restoration of a "Christian Europe" finds an echo in a vague, popular nostalgia for religious roots. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of young people from France, the rest of Europe, and other parts of the world gathered in—of all places—Paris two years ago for a papal visit. This in the city of the Boulevard St. Michel and Pigalle, a metropolis closely identified with the radical secularism of the French Revolution and, more recently, with atheistic existentialism and consumer hedonism. Also in allegedly post-Christian Europe, journeys to the old pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes, Fátima, and Santiago de Compostela are increasing. Could Christianity in Europe be moving away from an institutionally positioned model and toward a culturally diffuse pattern, more like the religions of many Asian countries, and therefore more difficult to measure by standard means such as church attendance and baptism statistics? Again, though this would make a significant change in religion, it can hardly be thought of as secularization.

The key theological question is: How are we to evaluate *both* the demise of the secularization myth as an explanatory paradigm and the subtle but important changes that are going on in the religious situation of the world today? Are existing techniques of cultural analysis suitable to address the question? There is a contradiction here. One of the reasons for the religious renaissance is said to be a restlessness and dissatisfaction with the values and meanings of modernity. But the very tools of modern social and cultural analysis often used to analyze this shift are themselves squarely based on "modern" assumptions about the nature of human life, the good society, and the meaning of freedom. All of this seems to press us toward a more explicit declaration of what the underlying, often unspoken "theologies" of secular modernity really are. How would the emergence of a genuinely "post-modern" culture in Europe, one presumably free of all culturally established master narratives (including secular ones), change all this? Might it alter the present anomalous situation in which a liberal-modernist critique of religion is generally presumed to be a legitimate part of public and scholarly discourse, but a religious critique of modernity is viewed as the inappropriate intrusion of a private or inaccessible argot into the public realm?

Beneath these rather large questions lurk even larger one. Forms of discourse and modes of inquiry gain their legitimacy because they rest on worldviews that are encoded in subtle and frequently unexamined cultural patterns. The unanticipated renaissance of religion in many parts of the world today, which has surprised so many cultural

observers, might turn out to be ephemeral, a merely superficial adjustment. But it could also mark the beginning of a long and fundamental reordering of worldviews, one in which cultural patterns that have endured since the Enlightenment would be markedly altered or even replaced. But our mental equipment for understanding a sea change on such a scale seems woefully lacking. How then are we to talk about it intelligently?

This is an especially urgent question for those theologians—including myself—who once accepted the secularization view of modern history in whole or in part. My own work on this topic has led me to the tentative conclusion that what we are witnessing is *neither* secularization *nor* its opposite (resacralization). Rather, it is a fascinating *transformation of religion*, a creative series of self-adaptations by religions to the new conditions created by the modernity some of them helped to spawn. Viewed in this light, I can see more continuity than discontinuity between my earlier work on the theology of secularization, especially as it was voiced in *The Secular City* (first published in 1965), and my current work on the theological significance of new religious movements. The thesis of my earlier book was that God, despite the fears of many religious people, is also present in the “secular,” in those spheres of life that are not usually thought of as “religious.” But current religious movements have vigorously reclaimed many of these secular spheres as places where the holy is present within the profane. The book was also, at points, a severe criticism of the traditional churches for ignoring the poor and marginalized populations of the world. Now, many of the new religious movements appeal to millions of people the traditional religious institutions have consistently failed to reach. I also argued in *The Secular City* that there was a kernel of truth in the overblown claims of the so-called (and now largely forgotten) death-of-God theologians. They saw, in a somewhat sensational way, that the abstract God of Western theologies and theistic philosophical systems had come to the end of his run. Their forecast of what would come next was dramatically mistaken, but the eruption of new movements that rely, as most of them do, on the direct experience of the divine rather than on creeds and philosophies seems to corroborate the death-of-God theologians’ diagnosis, while it completely undercuts their prescription. The fact is that atheism and rationalism no longer constitute (if they ever really did) the major challenge to Christian theology today. That challenge comes not from the death of God but from the “rebirth of the gods” (and the goddesses!).

As the twenty-first century begins, a momentous change *is* under way, and it is not just a religious one. No thoughtful person, believer

or nonbeliever, can ignore it. In the last few years I have focused a good deal of my attention on the astonishing growth of Pentecostal Christianity in large part because it provides such a useful x-ray, a way to understand the much larger mutation of religion of which it is an expression. In turn, change in the nature of religiousness provides an essential key to understanding the other big change or changes.

Many people, of course, have tried to fathom the meaning of the current religious revival, and some have even focused on the Pentecostal movement as a prime example. Earnest sociologists, puzzled psychologists, and diligent anthropologists have all taken their turns. But the picture they paint is often confused and contradictory. They point out that Pentecostalism seems to spread most quickly in the slums and shantytowns of the world's cities. Is it then a revival among the poor? Well, they concede, not exclusively. Its message also appeals to other classes and stations. Pentecostals vary in color and gender and nationality. They may be teenagers or old folks, though young adults lead the way. They may be poverty-stricken or perched somewhere in the lower ranges of the middle class: there are not many well-to-do. They are what one writer calls the "discontents of modernity," not fully at home with today's reigning values and lifestyles. Another scholar even describes the movement as a "symbolic rebellion" against the modern world. But that does not quite jibe either, for the people attracted to the Pentecostal message often seem even more dissatisfied with traditional religions than they are with the modern world that is subverting them. For this reason, another writer describes them as providing a "different way of being modern." Both may be right. They are refugees from the multiple tyrannies of both tradition and modernity. They are looking for what it takes to survive until a new day dawns. Is there anyone who does not find a little of this wistfulness within?

But how much does all this tell us? Are sociological or psychological analyses really enough to explain such a truly massive *religious* phenomenon? One historian has called the Pentecostal surge the most significant religious movement since the birth of Islam or the Protestant reformation. But these previous historic upheavals have for centuries defied attempts to explain them exclusively in secular categories, however sophisticated. The present religious upheaval, of which Pentecostalism is such a vivid example, also seems to slip through such conceptual grids. What does it mean?

As I have tried to reflect theologically on the significance of the new religious movements, it has become clear to me that they represent a clear signal that a "Big Change" is under way. Indeed, even the

most skeptical observers are beginning to concede that—whether for weal or for woe—something basic is shifting. It is a change, furthermore, that is not confined to some special religious or spiritual sphere. Granted, there are many reasons to doubt whether such a metamorphosis is actually at hand. It is true that in philosophy and literary criticism something called “postmodernism” is the rage of the journals. But intellectuals like to imagine themselves on the cutting edge, and postmodernism could be one more pedantic self-delusion. Gurus and crystal gazers talk about a “New Age,” but they sound suspiciously like the aging hippies who thirty years ago were hailing the imminent dawning of the Age of Aquarius. The “new world order” President Bush’s “Desert Storm” was supposed to introduce has turned out to be something of a mirage, and elsewhere in the international political arena we seem to be reeling backward to an era of ethnic and tribal bloodletting, not moving into anything very new at all. There is every reason to heed the skepticism of Ecclesiastes about whether there is ever any “new thing under the sun.” Still, the question stubbornly persists. Do the Pentecostal movement and the global religious stirring of which it is undoubtedly a part point to something larger and more significant?

I think so. As a lifelong student of religions—Christian and non-Christian, historical and contemporary, seraphic and demonic—I have come to believe two things about them. The first conviction is widely shared among my colleagues today, namely, that religious movements can never be understood apart from the cultural and political milieu in which they arise. I do not believe religious phenomena are “caused” by other factors; economic or political ones, for example. Still, they always come to life in close connection with a complex cluster of other cultural and social vectors. You have to look at the whole configuration.

I have also come to a second working premise, one that is not as widely shared among my colleagues. Although religion neither causes nor is caused by the other factors in a complex cultural whole, it is often the most accurate barometer. It can provide the clearest and most graphically etched portrait, in miniature, of what is happening in the big picture. Freud once said that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. This may or may not be the case. But I am convinced that religion is the royal road to the heart of a civilization, the clearest indication of its hopes and terrors, the surest index of how it is changing.

The reason I believe religion is such an invaluable window into the whole edifice is that human beings, so long as they are human, live according to patterns of value and meaning without which life would

not make sense. These patterns may be coherent or confused, elegant or slapdash, rooted in ancient traditions or pasted together in an ad hoc way. People may adhere to them tightly or loosely, consciously or unconsciously, studiously or unreflectively. But the patterns exist. They are encoded in gestures, idioms, recipes, rituals, seasonal festivals and family habits, doctrines, texts, liturgies, and folk wisdom. They are constantly shifting, mixing with each other, declining into empty usages, bursting into new life. But they are always there. Without them human existence would be unlivable. And they constitute what, in the most inclusive use of the term, we mean by "religion"—that which binds life together. Even that most famous of atheists, Karl Marx, after all, once said that religion is "the heart of a heartless world."

Naturally, just as it takes practice and experience to "decode" dreams, it also requires the combined efforts of many people—insiders and outsiders, observers and participants—to understand what the densely coded symbols and practices of religion tell us about its culture. Religions always contain a mixture of emotional and cognitive elements, often fused into powerful, compact bits of highly charged information. Understanding them requires a particular form of what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "close reading," one that brings historical and comparative methods together with both intuitive and critical perspectives. But the result is worth the effort. Knowing the gods and demons of a people and listening to their prayers and curses tell us more about them than all the statistics and case histories we could ever compile.

The twentieth century began with wildly disparate predictions. It was to be the "Christian century" in which science, democracy, and Christian values would triumph. Or it would be the century that would witness the final demise of superstition, obscurantism and, indeed, religion itself. For both parties of forecasters, paradoxically secularization became a central focus, sometimes almost an obsession. The religious party saw it as an awful threat; the modernizers welcomed it as a deliverance. It now turns out that both predictions were wildly wrong, and the myth has faded.

As the next century begins we are left with another question: What is the inner meaning of the massive transformation we are living through, a change within which the current religious mutation is an integral dimension, a sure sign, and perhaps even the determinative impulse? So far only faint harbingers of the new era are discernable. If the qualities of most of the new religious movements presage anything, we may expect a world that prefers equality to hierarchy, partic-

ipation to submission, experience over abstraction, multiple rather than single meanings, and plasticity rather than fixedness. There will of course be countercurrents and backlashes—some of which we also see foreshadowed in various examples of fundamentalism and religious terrorism and reaction. But the overall profile has, however dimly, begun to emerge. And the myth of secularization is dead.

Ultimately, of course, only the future will disclose what the future will be. But in the meantime, exploring the new present, unanticipated worldwide explosion of new religious movements, decoding their hidden messages, and listening to their inner voices will give us some valuable hints.