Reflections on the Secularization Thesis in the Sociology of Religion in Japan

Jan SWYNGEDOUW

Compared to the popularity of some other themes in the sociology of religion in Japan introduced from abroad, the concept and thesis of secularization has not, until recently, evoked a very enthusiastic response and has not led to an in-depth debate of the theoretical issues involved.

When we seek for an explanation of this attitude of hesitancy and caution – not necessarily in terms of a strictly causal relationship – we can first point to some general characteristics of the sociology of religion in Japan. In addition to those indicated by several other authors, the traditional attitude toward social change, particularly abrupt and radical change, and, further, a certain fear of tackling controversial theoretical issues, may have played a role in the cautious adoption and use of the secularization thesis.

Also some factors peculiar to the present time seem to have been influential. Among them we count the growing awareness that the peculiarity of Japan's present social and religious situation is different from that of the West, and that this fact requires a correspondingly peculiar conceptualization and methodology. In this connection, the theoretical issues of value-freedom in socio-religious research and of the cross-cultural applicability of concepts and theories are fundamental problems that call for renewed systematic consideration.

We might well call it an irony of history. It is now more than ten years since David Martin first launched an appeal to eliminate the concept of secularization from sociological language (Martin 1965), and yet not only has the avalanche of studies on contemporary changes in religion and society in terms of the secularization thesis not ceased, it has steadily increased in volume and in destructive power. What it has actually done away with, however, remains a moot question. If we heed Martin's warning that the uses (or more accurately, as he has it, misuses) of the term "secularization" are a barrier

to progress in the sociology of religion, the predicament we find ourselves in at this very moment might not seem too encouraging. If, on the other hand, we take a slightly more optimistic view — however rare and hesitating that may be in such an eschatology-prone age as ours — and endorse the opinion of Thomas Luckmann that theories of secularization have stimulated *some* systematic reflection (or at least the "wish" for systematic understanding) on the relation of religion to social change (Luckmann 1977, p. 17), we may find ourselves approaching this special meeting of the CISR with somewhat more confidence and consolation. In that event, what has been taken from us at this point is a certain complacency in the drift toward an a-historical view of human behavior.

The challenge coming from this meeting, then, is at once frightening and hopeful. Looking back at what has been written — and repeated ad infinitum — on secularization during the last two decades, I find it difficult to suppress a certain feeling of "indigestion." Having made up catalogs of the "term" secularization itself, we have finally arrived at the point where (provisional?) inventories of the different "theories" of secularization in the recent sociology of religion are beginning to see the light of day. The conclusions of pessimists and (relative) optimists alike lead generally in the same direction: how curious that such a vague and ideology-laden concept could pervade social theory to such a high degree and continue to survive in it. And even this conclusion is not new. It is only a repetition, albeit in more forceful and systematic terms, of what many of us pointed out years ago. Is it even remotely possible, then, to add anything meaningful to what has been written — to what, because of its extensiveness, is no longer capable of being absorbed and digested?

And yet this Tokyo meeting — insofar as the problem of secularization is one of its main themes — raises hope. If

my reading of the contemporary sociological literature on secularization is correct, there is one aspect of this problematic which I have found insufficiently taken into account. This is the cross-cultural meaning and value both of the concept of secularization and of its social reality. To be sure, those who have written on the subject have not been altogether unaware of the problem. With typical "scientific humility" many have pointed out that their theories apply only to the Western Judaeo-Christian tradition and to the industrial societies that arose in that tradition. But, exceptis excipiendis, that awareness has not led to a real cross-cultural fertilization in this area. This meeting – the first of its kind (and this paper, as one humble contribution to it) – is invested with the responsibility of exploring the question whether such a cross-fertilization is possible and desirable. We have the advantage, if not of treading entirely new territory, at least of opening it to a wider audience in the hope that reflection will foster deeper understanding of our present age and of the role man plays in it, in the West and in this corner of the globe.

To start this process some information is needed, I would think, on how the secularization debate, which originated and developed in the West, has been received in Japan, and how it has influenced the sociology of religion in this country. In these pages I do not intend to present a complete inventory of what has been done in this field. These pages offer only a few observations, from the viewpoint of a foreigner living in Japan, which will manifestly require correction and supplementation by my Japanese colleagues in order to lead to a fruitful cross-cultural exchange.

THE USE OF THE CONCEPT OF SECULARIZATION IN JAPAN

The concept of secularization has become an explicit theme of theoretical research in the West since the 1960s. One of the reasons for this "fad," at least in Europe, seems to have

been a sense of crisis among sociologists of religion that, together with the marginalization of their object of research, namely church-oriented religion, their own jobs would become more and more marginalized if they did not look out for new, "invisible" forms of religion (see, e.g., Luckmann 1967, Lauwers 1973, and others). Also not to be underestimated was the stimulus and challenge from the so-called "secular theologians," to mention only the impact of works like John A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) and Harvey Cox's *The secular city* (1965), followed by joint meetings of theologians and sociologists like the one at the Vatican in March 1969.

Such a "fad" could of course not escape the attention of the "West-watching" sociologists and other scientists of religion in Japan. If it is difficult (and delicate) to pinpoint who was the first in this country to draw attention to this phenomenon and exactly when this was done, we can at least mention that Japanese Protestant theologians were quick to catch up. In 1967, just two years after its publication in the United States, the Japanese translation of *The secular city* appeared. In the same year also – to cite only a few random examples – the late Hori Ichirō mentioned the Western interest in the problem of secularization in one of his articles (reprinted in Hori 1975, p. 155), and Tamaru Noriyoshi, our colleague at this session, referred to the secularization debate in his communication to the annual convention of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (Tamaru 1968, pp. 248-249). With sharp insight, he pointed out even at that early time the close relationship between the concept and process of secularization and the search for new definitions of religion in Western society, raising the question of the cross-cultural implications of this endeavor. It was also in this same period that I myself started a study of "the concept of secularization in the sociology of religion with special reference to Japan" at the Department of Religious

Studies of the University of Tokyo under the guidance of Professors Oguchi Iichi and, later, Yanagawa Keiichi.

It would be an exaggeration to say that these first stirrings in circles of the scientific study of religion in Japan found a swift resonance and follow-up in more extended theoretical studies. The "secularization debate" – insofar as it developed into a real debate – was almost exclusively limited to the more or less closed milieu of Protestant theologians and their publications. There secularization was treated as a phenomenon affecting Christianity in general and demanding a theological response from it. A selected group of Catholic representatives from different countries of Asia also had a follow-up meeting to the previously mentioned Vatican symposium on the theme "Secularization and atheism in Asia" in Tokyo during the summer of 1969. Although some sociological aspects of the problem came under discussion, no wider coverage was given to this meeting and the reports were not even published.

In the years that followed, however, the term "secularization" has gradually and rather inconspicuously gained citizenship in the jargon of Japanese sociologists of religion. In this connection I should not neglect to mention the name of one Japanese scholar who has done, and continues to do, groundbreaking work in searching out new interpretations of the contemporary religious scene in Japan in terms of the secularization problem. In his 1972 *Sezoku shakai no shūkyō* [Religion in secular society] and in other publications, Ikado Fujio has strongly defended the thesis that secularization does not necessarily mean the decline of religion as such, and has tried to apply this to the religious situation in Japan. Others as well, such as Morioka, Yanagawa, Takenaka, et al., have increasingly used the term in describing contemporary changes in Japanese religion and society. (See also a recent symposium on the relation of religion to social reform, Higuma 1978.) Besides these developments, the translation

of recent Western literature on secularization, such as Luckmann's *The invisible religion* in 1976 and the various articles on this subject in academic journals like the *Japanese journal of religious studies*, leading up to this Tokyo CISR Meeting, have played a considerable role in this trend. As a further example, I would point also to the symposium held at the 1977 annual convention of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies. The symposium dealt with the theme "A reconsideration of the concept of religion" and was very clearly influenced by the problems raised by theories on secularization. It is, indeed, only in the last two or three years that real momentum has gathered in dealing with this problem in a more systematic way. A last example is, of course, this Tokyo CISR Meeting itself. It shows, if my interpretation is correct, that Japanese sociologists of religion have become very eager to exchange ideas about what is happening to religion and society nowadays with their colleagues from the West. From these colleagues they have borrowed many of their concepts. Toward these concepts they have also become more and more critical.

As a provisory conclusion, however, it should be noted that, as over against the popularity of some other themes in the sociological study of religion in Japan, until recently the concept and thesis of secularization has not evoked a very enthusiasic response in this country and has not led to an in-depth debate of the theoretical issues involved. In the following pages I would like to offer a few observations on these developments.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ADOPTION OF THE SECULARIZATION THESIS IN JAPAN

It goes without saying that any comment on the adoption and development of the secularization thesis in Japan is necessarily of a limited, personal, and impressionistic nature. Moreover, it would be presumptuous to claim that direct

causal relations can be inferred from general trends in Japanese society as such, to the influence of these trends on scientific research, and to the actual issue under consideration here. Insofar as such observations give us a degree of insight into the social background against which the scientific enterprise evolves, they can, however, serve as a reminder that this enterprise is influenced by factors that lie outside the realm of so-called strictly neutral objectivity. How this is evident in the treatment of secularization has recently been pointed out by several authors (e.g., Luckmann 1977).

If we can characterize the attitude of Japanese scholars toward the secularization thesis as one of "hesitancy" or "caution" and then try to categorize in a preliminary way some of the elements that seem to have played a role in shaping this state of affairs, we should start with a distinction between factors characteristic of Japanese sociology of religion in general and factors particularly prominent at the present time.

Factors generally characteristic of the sociology of religion in Japan. In order to understand the particular treatment of secularization in Japan, it is first necessary to indicate briefly a few general characteristics of the discipline as it is carried out in this country. As several authors have pointed out (Morioka 1975, chap. 10; Yanagawa and Abe 1978), Japanese sociology of religion – like many, if not most, other academic disciplines – is heavily dependent on theoretical frameworks introduced from the West. When I mentioned earlier that almost no cross-fertilization has occurred yet between the East and the West, this was not intended to mean that both sides have been leading an independent existence. Indeed, Japan has been borrowing to a very great extent from the achievements of the West. Yet, this process — which, in fact, is only one single aspect of a much wider movement of cultural borrowing that has characterized the

history of Japanese culture up to the present — has involved continual difficulties. Some were clearly recognized as such and elicited a conscious caveat. Others did not reach this stage and became elements in shaping that peculiar brand of "adapted" Western theories used in Japanese research. Under this latter type I would classify the very first step in the introduction process, namely, that of translation in the strict sense of the word. To express it somewhat euphemistically, there exist some subtle "cultural differences" between the Western and Japanese conceptions of what a faithful translation ought to be.

The next step, that of interpretation of the imported materials, is of course influenced by the first. But here awareness of the existence of problems has certainly reached a high degree, so much so that this stage has often become the terminus ad quem for many scholars in their research. It is amazing how much has been done and is still being done in the "exegesis" of the theories of *some* Western authors such as Durkheim, Weber, Bellah, and others. The impression is sometimes given that, by engaging in this kind of theoretical research, Japanese scholars have felt themselves sufficiently planted in the hallowed tradition of scientific objectivity and therefore exempted from examining their own religious traditions.

One result of this tendency is seen in the fact that relatively few scholars in Japan have taken the third step in the process of introducing foreign theories, that of "conscious" application to the Japanese scene. Here the difficulties have been overwhelming and — as I will develop later — awareness of them has rapidly deepened in recent years. As for the "origin" of these difficulties, I can only refer to what Yanagawa and Abe have pointed out in their report to the Strasbourg CISR Conference (Yanagawa and Abe 1978, pp. 6-9). The growing "awareness" of these difficulties is a corollary of the (worldwide?) resurgence of interest in and attention to the unique-

ness and value of particular cultures, a trend which in contemporary Japan is extremely strong.

Though incomplete, these few observations may serve as a background against which to throw some light on the introduction of the secularization thesis in the sociology of religion in Japan.

The secularization thesis is a theoretical model that seeks to interpret the role played by religion in social change. As just mentioned, Yanagawa and Abe, in their report on the sociology of religion in Japan to the 1977 CISR meeting at Strasbourg, gave some very informative and sharp observations as to why this issue, while not entirely neglected, has elicited little enthusiasm among Japanese social scientists. Together with the difficulty of finding in Japan a "church-type" object of research comparable to Christian churches in the West, they also mention the intellectual legacy of Tokugawa Confucianism with its neglect of the religious factor in social change. To this they add the interesting observation that "the few social scientists who dealt seriously with questions of religious belief were Christians." On the other hand, research on religion from the side of the so-called "scientists of religion" has a long tradition in Japan. Insofar as religion has been studied in its sociological aspects, attention was mainly drawn to primitive phenomena such as shamanism and to the emergence of new religions. With regard to the latter, these authors point out the strong influence of Marxism on the theoretical interpretive schemes employed by many scholars.

These observations by Yanagawa and Abe, particularly their references to the influence of Christianity and Marxism on the "interests" of some Japanese scholars of religion and social change, corroborate to a certain extent a very personal impression of mine about a point that has always intrigued me in my contacts with Japanese circles of religious studies — a point that has, I presume, a direct bearing on the "fate" of the secularization thesis in this country.

Among the undeclared "metatheoretical assumptions" which, in Japan, have generated a certain caution toward issues of religion and social change, hesitancy about accepting the phenomenon of religion as a key factor in determining the development of society is not the only matter to be taken into account. Equally worthy of attention is the traditional Japanese attitude toward social change itself and particularly toward forms of change that are rather fundamental and radical in nature. In the West, one of the main metatheoretical assumptions of the secularization thesis is said to be found in philosophies of history. These philosophies of history accept in one form or another a notion of "progress" or at least "development." This allows for the possibility that historical development may occur through abrupt and radical socio-cultural changes. Seen from the East, it is not very difficult to discern among most Western authors who have dealt with the problem of secularization – social scientists as well as theologians – a deep sense of crisis about what is happening nowadays to Western culture. This is not the place to give an extended account of the philosophies of history propounded in Japan and of the basic thinking of the Japanese toward historical development (see, for example, Bellah 1965, pp. 168-229). What can be pointed out is that the traditional Japanese attitude toward history allows less room for the notion of abrupt change and crisis than that which is so conspicuous in the West. It is therefore no coincidence, I think, that those in Japan who have dealt with the problem of religion and social change, particularly in terms of the secularization thesis, have primarily been scholars heavily influenced in their thinking by the Western philosophy of history as propounded in Christianity and Marxism, two ways of hinking which, seen from the East, are often regarded as "the inside and outside of the same coat." (For the influence of Christian ideas on the secularization thesis in the research of Ikado Fujio, see Swyngedouw 1979.)

There is still another factor that I would like to mention briefly in this connection, a factor that I want above all to leave open for discussion and for correction by my Japanese colleagues. It concerns the influence of Japanese attitudes toward theorizing and theoretical debates on their hesitancy to tackle the problem of secularization. I have indicated already that a great part of the energy devoted to socio-religious research has been spent on the "exegesis" of Western theories. That the ultimate step of applying them to the Japanese situation is often not taken is partially due – as I mentioned in passing and hope to develop further later on – to differences between the actual situation of religion in the West and that in Japan. There is, however, something to be added to this, something that can be called a "divorce of the sociology of religion from theoretical issues." This is certainly not a situation particular to Japan. A decade and more ago awareness of this divorce was one of the reasons and starting points for Luckmann's research (Luckmann 1967, esp. chap. 1). It was also pointed out by many others (see, e.g., Dobbelaere 1968, Grumelli 1969). The fear, however, of confronting directly and in an extensive way complex and long-range problems on a high theoretical level and – if I may be allowed to use this expression – the tendency to "escape" this dimension by fleeing into empirical field-work of a very concrete and non-committal character is certainly very strong in Japan.

Clarifying the reasons behind this phenomenon belongs to the realm of the study of cultural patterns and behavior. Let me only mention that, according to Western "rational" standards, the contribution of "the Japanese" lies more in the area of practical, empirical issues than in that of original philosophical thinking, a fact which might be regarded as correlative to Japanese religiosity itself which places more emphasis on ritual practices than on doctrines or beliefs. (Perhaps the fear of confusing the fields of science and phi-

losophy by too much theoretical research, and of infringing
on the value-freedom of the science of religion, could also
play a role in this phenomenon.)

Moreover, the Japanese propensity for harmony and for
avoiding, therefore, the harsh expression of conflicting opin-
ions – a practice sometimes bewildering to Japanese partici-
pants at international conferences – is also not conducive to
raising the treatment of theoretical issues to the level of real
scientific debate. In this respect, the secularization thesis –
in itself a very controversial issue – is certainly a case in point.
No real "secularization debate" has arisen in Japan. Where
differences of opinion have finally emerged – as, for example,
in a recently published symposium on religion and social
change with Marxist and non-Marxist participants (see Higuma
1978), these differences are explicitly mentioned in the pre-
sentation of the book as if something extraordinary had
happened, something "offensive to pious ears."

Lest I be misunderstood, let me repeat that the above
considerations are not in the least intended to detract from
the many valuable contributions that Japanese sociologists
of religion have in fact made. If we look, for example, at
what has been achieved in the study of related problems
such as those of religion and modernization, urbanization,
and the like – problems in focus before "secularization"
as an interpretive scheme became popular – we can only
deplore the fact that these contributions by Japanese scholars
did not find a wider audience. What these few observations
are intended to convey is this: the characteristics of the
sociology of religion that I have referred to (for the most part
already pointed out by other authors) have hardly stimulated
enthusiastic adoption of the secularization thesis.

Factors peculiar to the present time. In addition to these
general factors, there are some others, particularly strong
at the present time, which seem to have exerted a great in-

fluence on the attitude of many Japanese sociologists of religion toward the problem under consideration and which, therefore, have supported the trend toward hesitancy and caution already inherent in the Japanese sociology of religion. All these specific factors are more or less related to increasing awareness of the problems involved in the cross-cultural application of Western-derived concepts and theories. The awareness is growing very rapidly that the object of socio-religious research, namely, the (present) religious and social situation of Japan, is different from that of the West, and that this peculiarity, if not uniqueness, of the situation requires a correspondingly peculiar conceptualization and methodology. As a consequence of this way of thinking, the secularization thesis has been and is still regarded as an example par excellence of a theoretical model which, because of its cultural and historical limitations, should be "handled with care."

It is evident that this awareness of cultural difference between Japan and the West is not a novel thing. From the very beginning of the sociology of religion in Japan – and of most, if not all, other disciplines – this question has been at the origin of the difficulties Japanese scholars encountered in employing the Western concepts and methodologies they acquired in their scientific formation. We have already seen, according to the report by Yanagawa and Abe, that one way of circumventing this problem has been to undertake empirical research focused on the new religions and on religious phenomena of a so-called primitive level, both of which lend themselves more readily to interpretation in terms of Western concepts and theories. What is rather novel is the fact that in recent years this awareness has been increasingly brought to a more conscious and explicitly stated level. And it is interesting to notice that an opportunity (or a scape-goat?) for this recognition seems to have been found in the theory of secularization. Indeed, by repeatedly pointing out that

the concept of secularization is heavily culture-bound and applies as such only to the Western society where it originated, Japanese sociologists of religion have helped to "unmask" one of the metatheoretical assumptions of the secularization thesis. In doing so, however, they have implicitly acknowledged, it seems to me, that their own search for a "Japanese conceptualization and methodology" is ultimately based on a similar interconnectedness of metatheoretical assumptions and explicit theory. The "Japanese" sociology of religion, so fervently sought for nowadays, poses similar problems as to the role of culture-bound metatheoretical assumptions in sociological research. The awareness that this implies a challenge to the principle of value-freedom and objectivity, so much revered in Japan, is, we will see, only at the beginning stage.

It is hard to say exactly when this call for "self-examination" regarding the introduction and sometimes reckless application of foreign theories, and for the necessity of an alternate conceptualization and methodology, came into the open. It was accompanied by a renewed interest in traditional Japanese expressions of religiosity and in research studies on these subjects (see Tamaru 1975). This, in turn, came to form part of a more general trend in Japan, particularly pronounced from the early 1970s, which can be characterized as an identity-quest or even identity-crisis in the face of growing internationalization and Japan's role in this development (see Swyngedouw 1976, 1979). As a concrete example I would like to cite a few "reminiscences" of the late Hori Ichirō who in 1970, reflecting on the university struggles of that period, warned his fellow-scholars of religion against too heavy a dependence on foreign theories:

> Haven't we reached a stage where the Japanese should develop their own principles, their own ideology and logic? If not, we will end up, as usual, pursuing the fads of foreign countries. This holds true also for the academic world. When a some-

what new theory is propounded, we jump on it and tend to dismiss the preceding ones as old-fashioned and out-of-date. It is not only young students who act like this. The trend is very pronounced in the way of thinking which holds that one is a famous scholar because in no time he reads and introduces all kinds of foreign magazines and books. Maybe this is still needed for the natural sciences, but for the human sciences? .... What Japan has done until now was only to deform and transform things coming from abroad. It almost never created things from within, without models from the outside. I think, therefore, that precisely now the time has come, for the first time in our history, to undergo the pains of childbirth (Hori 1975, pp. 257-258, my translation).

Hori's words have to be seen in the context of his own interest in the field of Japanese folk religion, which a fortiori calls for a more original and creative approach. When in the last years before his premature death, he referred to secularization and tried — without a blanket commitment as to its appropriateness — to use it to describe changes in present-day Japan and religion, he himself was heavily indebted to Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane and to the secularization theory propounded by Paul Tillich. Both of these men were scholars with whom Hori had a personal relationship and whom he esteemed very highly.

View of present social reality. The conviction that "now the time has come" to look more critically at foreign-imported theories was prompted in the first place, as I said before, by a new consciousness of the peculiarity of Japanese culture and of religion as part of that culture. This is not the place (assuming that it is even possible) to give a full account of the differences between Japanese and Western religion, or even to summarize them in a few words. Certainly nobody would ever doubt their existence. The Japanese feel more and more proud of them, and foreigners usually become increasingly aware of the dangers inherent in judging Japanese religiosity

by means of Western concepts the longer they reside in this
country. What is debatable, however, is the question to what
extent these differences have to be emphasized without
regard to other elements of a more universal nature. These
latter elements are of a twofold kind. Some of them are
religious values and expressions thereof which can be inter-
preted as "universal anthropological categories." To this type
belong the aforementioned "religious phenomena of the
primitive level" which, as a matter of fact, have been studied
with the anthropological methodology used by Western
scholars of primitive religions. (Interestingly enough, it is
these same elements which, according to scholars like Hori
Ichirō, require even more than others a non-Western approach
because they belong to the most native layer of Japanese
religiosity. This lands us at once in the heart of the problem
of the relation between "particularism" and "universalism.")
Other elements of a more universal character in Japanese
religion are those that have arisen under the impact of foreign
cultures, particularly those peculiar to modern industrialized
societies. The relative ease with which Western theories about
"sects" can be applied to some of the new religions in Japan
suggests the existence of such elements in them.

The present emphasis, however, is on a rediscovery of
aspects of Japanese religiosity that differ from those promi-
nent in the Western world and under study by Western sociolo-
gists of religion. In this connection (see again Yanagawa
and Abe 1978) the benign neglect of doctrinal beliefs and the
differing roles of the various religious institutions in Japan are
some of the points which increasingly attract the attention
of scholars of religion. This fact has, of course, an immediate
bearing on the treatment of secularization, particularly insofar
as secularization in Western perspective is very often seen as
a phenomenon which – with roots in the distant past – is
especially prominent at the present time. The hesitancy
toward adopting the secularization thesis at face value is due

not only to the reasons mentioned earlier, for example, the difficulty of finding an "institutional equivalent" to the Western Christian churches with their rapid loss of social influence, or the general Japanese mistrust of opinions based on an acute sense of radical change and crisis. A further reason needs to be added, I think: one of the metatheoretical assumptions underlying many of the secularization theories is that we are in a period of radical socio-cultural change *now*. It is precisely this point which I often find overlooked by many of my Japanese colleagues, particularly those less influenced by Christian or Marxist thought.

Besides a general reluctance to consider the eternal flow of time as subject to radical change, we also have to reckon with the fact that in Japan there is only a weak awareness that human societies seem to be entering a new phase of history *now* – even though, for a time, it was popular to speak about the imminent "submergence of our island-country." Where social change has become an object of scientific research, it has been viewed mainly as an ongoing process of modernization, prepared by certain traditional values and brought into the open through the impact of foreign ideas and techniques. The opening of the country and the subsequent Meiji Restoration in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first experience of defeat in war, and the immediate postwar years in the middle of the present century are the "strong times" in this process. If the term "secularization" is employed to describe social and religious changes, it is mainly used to denote this ongoing process without further connotations as to changes that might be occurring nowadays and that might be more radical than anything that has happened to Japanese society up to this point. As I have stated elsewhere (Swyngedouw 1976, 1978), my personal opinion is that it no longer suffices to look at Japanese religion and to approach the problem of what we might call secularization in this country *exclusively* in terms of that ongoing

modernization process. I would think that some phenomena of recent years, such as the continuing boom of "theories of Japaneseness" and Japan's rather abrupt propulsion into the international scene (with responsibilities not only for receiving but also for giving), indicate that something novel and radical is happening and that this is affecting the basic layers of Japanese religiosity.

The emphasis on the peculiarities of Japanese religiosity, I would like to add, is not really much help in "conscienticizing" people for these present changes. Such emphasis is, by its very nature, conservative and calls attention to the elements of continuity in society and culture. If, however, it can serve as an antidote against the adoption of a secularization theory that puts unilateral emphasis on change, it will at least have promoted reflection on some other issues involved in the concept of secularization. Indeed, in the traditional — and relatively unchanging — basic layers of Japanese religiosity, there can be discovered elements of secularization avant la lettre. Research into these elements constitutes, no doubt, a valuable contribution that the Japanese sociology of religion can make to the present discussion.

Theoretical issues. If the view of social reality expressed by the term secularization differs in Japan from that of the West, this is equally if not more true when we focus on the use of the concept itself. I can only repeat here briefly what I have already mentioned several times in passing (and has been indicated in extenso by many authors) about the dependence of the notion of secularization on a specific definition of religion. The term secularization itself is an expression of a traditional dualistic way of thinking with regard to religion. This way of thinking is based on a dichotomy between sacred and secular in the sphere of ideas, with a correlative division between spiritual and temporal powers in the sphere of institutions. The use of such historically and

culturally bound concepts – even apart from the empirical question of whether they are still appropriate for describing present-day changes in Western religion and society – raises problems of a more theoretical nature which have special repercussions in Japan. These problems also constitute elements that have retarded adoption of the secularization concept in the Japanese sociology of religion. I shall mention here only two, already touched on above and also closely related to each other: the problem of value-freedom and that of the cross-cultural applicability of the concepts we use in sociological research.

Value-freedom in scientific research is a point which has received extremely strong emphasis in Japan. In the field of religious studies this has often been accompanied by the opinion that those involved in such research should not have deep personal commitments to a religious belief. This understanding of value-freedom has also led to a rather critical attitude toward applied sociology of religion at the service of religious organizations as exemplified in much of the sociologie religieuse of continental Europe. In practice, however, this theoretical stance has often proved difficult to maintain. Moreover, it has come under increasingly heavy scrutiny and discussion in recent years – especially since the university struggles of a decade ago – particularly by younger scholars who advocate the consideration of "anthropological" (man-centered) values in scientific research (see, e.g., Taniguchi 1977).

This emphasis on value-freedom roots, of course, in certain Western theories of an earlier period that were introduced to Japan and found a good response among scholars eager to catch up with the rationality of the West. (If I may be allowed to add a very personal observation, I sometimes have the impression that the excessive emphasis on "objectivity" and "neutrality" in Japanese academic circles is to a certain extent an unconscious reaction against the lack of these values

in ordinary Japanese cultural patterns of behavior.)

It is in a climate of thinking still heavily imbued with this notion of value-freedom that the term secularization appeared, not so much as a possible hypothesis for empirical research but as an object of thematic consideration. It rapidly became evident that secularization is an ideologically loaded concept and theory – and that, as with almost all major bodies of theory in socio-religious sciences, it contains metatheoretical assumptions about religion and change and ultimately a view of man himself. I believe that, from the very beginning, many Japanese scholars of religion had an intuitive understanding of the challenge this concept posed to their traditional under-standing of value-freedom and that this intuition has been a factor in their attitude toward its adoption and use.

Behind all the considerations brought forward so far is an issue which, for those of us at this international encounter, is at once the most challenging one and perhaps also the most difficult to agree upon. This is the problem of the cross-cultural applicability of the concept of secularization, of that of religion itself, and of other concepts used in religious and social studies.

As already repeatedly indicated, this problem has been somewhat neglected in the sociology of religion in Japan for a long time. Foreign theories were taken in and often without much reflection applied to the Japanese situation. Where difficulties arose, as of course they did, methods were invented to circumvent them. It is only in the last few years that this problem has come into the open, and again the secularization thesis, which exactly in the same period "offered itself for adoption," has become one of the rallying points around which discussions of this issue could be held.

Under the influence of renewed awareness as to the pecu-liarity (uniqueness?) of the Japanese situation, the trend has naturally been to adopt a critical stance toward theories that place too much stress on cross-cultural applicability. This

trend, however, has also been accompanied by a search for more fundamental categories, categories that belong to "humanity" as such. It is in this sense that recent sociology of religion, in Japan as elsewhere, has increasingly come to face the problem of overcoming the tension that exists between realities and concepts particular to a specific culture, and realities and concepts grounded in a common humanity.

Whether we put the emphasis on the cultural limitations of our concepts or on their universal value is no doubt of great theoretical importance. It is, moreover, closely connected with the preceding point: to what extent does our stance on this question have a bearing on the objectivity and value-freedom of our research? Is it a particular case of a meta-theoretical premise?

The emphasis we choose also has some very practical consequences. A positive or negative stance toward the cross-cultural applicability of concepts greatly influences the possibility (and desirability) of cross-cultural exchanges like this meeting. Real exchange is made possible thanks to the existence of mutual differences which become the very elements that constitute our contributions to the creation of deeper mutual understanding. But a common ground is also needed, a point from which the exchange of contributions can start. If both elements, the particular and the universal, are not present, cross-fertilization becomes an impossible task. It is this dialectic between the particular and universal that constitutes our greatest challenge.

What I have tried to do in these pages is to offer, in very general terms, a description of the attitude taken by Japanese sociologists of religion toward the adoption and use of the secularization thesis. I have characterized this attitude as one of hesitancy and caution, and have sought an explanation of this stance — not necessarily in terms of a strictly causal relationship — in some general characteristics of the sociology

of religion in Japan and in some factors which have become more prominent in recent years. I repeat that these observations are difficult to prove empirically. But, aware of the necessity of articulating the general framework in which our research is performed, I present these observations as material for reference and as background information for this cross-cultural meeting.

I myself am a very strong believer in the possibility and desirability of cross-cultural encounters. But I am also aware of, and have experienced, the difficulties they involve. My deepest wish is that the flow of exchange between East and West will really become one to which both partners can increasingly bring their own peculiar contributions and which will be of increasing benefit to both sides.

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