The Problem of Secularization: A Preliminary Analysis

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The concept of secularization, though with a long history of over three hundred years in Western intellectual history, came to play a central part in sociology of religion rather late, around 1960, in connection with the general topic of "religion and social change." In Japan, translated as sezokuka, *it was first taken up by Christian academic circles, but its reception in other quarters was not so rapid.*

If we want to approach the problem as an object of scientific inquiry, we should take into account the peculiar ambiguity deriving from its history in the West as well as some issues arising from its application to Japanese or other non-Western societies. First of all, its multi-layeredness and plurifunctionality must be kept in mind, consisting as it does of three different levels – description, interpretation, and ideological evaluation – of the factual process of change occurring in religion in contemporary societies. At the same time, we have to examine whether its transhistorical and cross-cultural application is possible and legitimate.

In this paper, an attempt is made to first make clear the background against which the problem of secularization arose. Further, it is contended that a way must be sought somehow to synthesize the wide, comparative perspective with the historical awareness of the contemporary situation and the Western view with the peculiarly Japanese methodology.

Introduction. Perhaps it need hardly be mentioned that, since the 1960s, the problem of secularization has moved into the focus of public attention and become one of the central issues in academic discussions about religion. The growing number of materials dealing directly or indirectly with this topic published abroad – and recently also in Japan – may be taken as an indication of its contemporary relevance.[1] These discussions are highly intriguing for stu-

dents of religion, though they sometimes elicit a feeling of embarrassment as well.

The sense of embarrassment is due mainly to the fact that, despite its popularity, the term still remains quite ambiguous and is employed differently by many in a variety of contexts. Jan Swyngedouw, one of the first to start exploring systematically the theme in Japan, points to the circumstance when he defines it as "a very ambiguous word though it plays a central role in the self-understanding of the contemporary West, notably of Christianity." According to him, it is "used as a generic term to designate the whole process of change occurring in contemporary society, with special regard to what has traditionally been called 'religion'" (Swyngedouw 1973, p. 495, tentative translation by the writer). This statement contains, in nuce, nearly all the important issues which must be considered in any scientific treatment of the subject. In view of this equivocality, it is no wonder that not a few scholars have felt a strong need to first clarify its different meanings. Shiner, for instance, distinguished five or six different contexts in which the term is currently used (Shiner 1967a, 1967b), and Hill, following him, attempted to further explore the definitional problem (Hill 1973, pp. 228-251). Such an endeavor is of course of great service and must surely be continued in future.

Although it is a source of much confusion among those interested in the topic, it is equally true that the secularization problem is of utmost importance for contemporary sociology of religion or science of religion in general. Simply stated, this is because the concept inevitably evokes the important and perennial question as to the definition of

1. To cite a few examples, the book by Glasner (1977) includes 255 titles in its bibliography and the recent one by Martin (1978) as many as 505 titles, mainly in English. Today, it would be hard to find an introductory textbook in sociology of religion that did not mention the theme of secularization.

"religion" and can indeed be reduced, at least partially, to it. As Hill puts it, "in any discussion of the secularization controversy it is important to specify that the conclusion of the argument depends to a considerable extent on its basic premise: how we define secularization – and, perhaps even more fundamentally, how we define religion – largely determines whether or not such a process can be identified" (Hill 1973, p. 228). Moreover, the very expression "secularization" obviously implies a transition from a non-secular to a secular situation. But what is the subject matter of this transition or change? Is it the faith of individual believers or the structure of society? And when, where, why, and how was the process initiated, and whither will it lead? Can it be regarded as a progress or evolution and, if so, in what specific sense? Thus, we have to do with a whole complex of issues which are very hard to disentangle. At this point, suffice it to say that the term "secularization" in common usage is rather loosely understood to mean some sort of change from a religious to a non-religious, or from a sacred to a secular (profane) mode of being. It is no other than an application of the sacred-profane dichotomy, prevailing so far in the general theory of religion, to its history. The view that this dichotomy is a distinguishing feature of every religion, however, is now being called into question from various sides (see, for example, Luhmann 1977, p. 226; Trillhaas 1972, pp. 127-131). Be that as it may, it is certain that the problem of secularization is deeply interrelated with that of how to define religion and how to grasp its history in its entirety.

These problems, ranging from empirical researches into the reality of secularization as such to their higher-order premises, may aptly be called philosophical (or, for that matter, methodological) in nature. And since the present writer, being no professional sociologist, is primarily interested in methodological concerns, this paper, rather than

presenting new empirical data, will make an attempt to analyze the structure of the secularization problem from the viewpoint of Wissenschaftstheorie and paraphrase some of the points made on an earlier occasion (Tamaru 1978). But, before turning to this subject, a brief survey of the term and of the controversy revolving around it may be necessary.

History of the concept and its interpretation. The term "secularization" doubtless derives from the Western religious tradition. *Sezokuka*, as used in the contemporary Japanese academic vocabulary, may quite probably be considered a direct translation of the English word or its equivalents in other modern European languages. The individual elements constituting this compound word, *se* and *zoku*, as well as their combination *sezoku*, have for a long period of time been in use in our country. As is the case with many other terms of a more or less technical nature, they are borrowings from the Chinese, and their origin can be traced back to such important thinkers of classical times as Mencius or Mo-tzu. In those classical sources – and afterwards, too – the word *se* (which in Japanese is also read *yo*) is usually used to refer to the world of human beings, this world, and the customs and rules current here. *Zoku* likewise means manners or habits. We also have a compound form: *zokuka*, which may mean instructing people in such social customs, but more often tends to have the rather negative connotation of falling into bad habits, becoming vulgar and degenerate. In this connection, it must be remembered that in Buddhist terminology both *se* and *zoku* are used to designate the ordinary, daily spheres of life in distinction from the properly religious one, for instance, lay people in contrast to monks (*sō*) who have renounced the world. Phrases like *sōzoku* (clergy and laity), *genzoku* (leaving clerical status and returning to an ordinary way of life), *sehō* or *zokutai*

(worldly truth) illustrate this use. Here we may have something comparable to the Western dichotomy between the religious and the secular.

In the history of Japanese religion, particularly of Japanese Buddhism, there have been many periods when its representatives and institutions lost their independence and got deeply involved in daily, worldly matters. This was the case, for example, during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868). At that time the majority of Buddhist schools enjoyed the patronage of the government (the shogunate), and Buddhism was given the status of a semi-state religion. But symptoms of degeneration became evident as time went on, coming to the fore in the delinquency of some priests and phenomena of a similar nature. These occasioned severe criticisms against Buddhism, criticisms brought forward by three major groups: (1) Confucian intellectuals and economic theorists, (2) scholars of *kokugaku* or National Learning, and (3) some daimyo who were in charge of local domains and therefore had political motivations. These criticisms resemble in many respects those leveled against Christianity by modern Western thinkers of the Enlightenment period and are a very interesting topic of investigation also from the viewpoint of intellectual history. Tsuji Zennosuke, an acknowledged authority on the history of Japanese Buddhism, discusses these phenomena in detail in a chapter of his standard work, calling them *zokuka* of Buddhism (Tsuji 1951, p. 450). It is clear, however, that his reference is more to signs of moral degradation on the part of Buddhist clergy than to a general trend of religious development.

Presumably the first scholar to apply the term *sezokuka* to the history of Japanese religion was Hori Ichirō. In an article entitled "Social transformation and Buddhism" he called the attention of readers to a basic dilemma between "anti-secularism and secularization" (*hanzoku to sezokuka*) always inherent in Japanese Buddhism. According to him,

Buddhism, originally a religion with a very high degree of anti-secularism, had become subservient to secular powers, particularly the state, since its introduction into this country. True, this tendency toward secularization had appeared in an earlier stage of its development, but came to be so conspicuous only in Japan (Hori 1961, p. 46). Several years later, in partial adoption of the views of foreign scholars like Charles Eliot and Robert Bellah, he once called the latent religiosity peculiar to Japan "Shinto" in its wider sense. His point was that since Japanese religion was from the very beginning a "secular religion" subordinate to political values, it is by no means possible to trace a process of "secularization" in the modern Western and Christian sense of the word (Hori 1975, p. 155, first published in 1967).

Thus, though he introduced the term "secularization," explicitly citing the English original, it cannot be readily decided whether his problem was exactly the same as the one that has been the main theme of debate during the last decade. For what preoccupied him was the interpretation of the history of Japanese religion or, more precisely, of the undercurrents going through all historical periods, whereas the "secularization controversy" revolves primarily around the question of how to assess the religious situation in the so-called developed societies of the present age. As mentioned above, the concept of secularization in this more specific sense is obviously Western in origin and has been brought into this country only in recent years. Or we might go a step farther and assume that the discussion of the problem itself, insofar as there has been any, was stimulated by the impact of Western views on Japanese scholars and was modelled after these views. In support of this assumption, it may be pointed out that the book *The secular city* by Harvey Cox (1965), one of the spokesmen of "secular theology," was translated into Japanese as soon as two years after its

appearance. In this context, too, we can cite the fact that those scholars who first took up the theme as an object of scientific inquiry, like Ikado Fujio (see his 1972 and 1974 books together with many other articles dealing with the subject of contemporary religion) or Swyngedouw (1971 etc.), had a Christian background, either Protestant or Catholic, and seem to share to a considerable extent the awareness of the problem prevailing in the United States or Europe.[2]

Turning now to the history of the term and its various implications in the West, we already have a number of relevant studies and need not repeat them anew (see, for example, Lübbe 1965, Shiner 1967a). For the time being, we can also put aside theological considerations of the subject and concentrate, instead, on delineating the major lines of research work carried out within the frame of sociology of religion or science of religion in general.

In his brief account of the development of sociology of religion, Fürstenberg mentions three fundamental assumptions which have served as guidelines for many thinkers when they approached the social reality of religion. One of them, beside the "thesis of integration" and "thesis of

2. Around 1960, Japanese scholars started to approach the problem of "religion and social change." The topics, however, were usually formulated in terms of "urbanization" or "industrialization," both of which were more limited in implication than "secularization." The survey by Kishimoto Hideo on "Urbanization of Shinto" (Kishimoto 1964) may be regarded as one of the earliest efforts of this kind. At the Second International Conference for Shinto Studies, held in Tokyo in June 1967, "industrialization" ("modernization") was discussed as the fifth sub-topic of the overall theme "Continuity and Change" (see Kokugakuin University, Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics 1968). As for research on the Buddhist side dealing with changes on the contemporary scene, the work by Fujii Masao (1974) may be mentioned as most pertinent. The articles reprinted in this book mostly deal with the topic of Buddhism and "urbanization," not "secularization." These random examples seem to indicate that the concept of "secularization" did not become fully indigenized until the introduction of "secular theology" among Protestant theological circles and the appearance of the works by Ikado Fujio (1972, 1974).

compensation," was the "thesis of secularization" which became especially relevant in dealing with the dimension of social change in relation to religion (see Fürstenberg 1961, 1964). Matthes, adopting this view, went so far as to contend that *all* researches in the field of sociology of religion were from their inception closely connected with the thesis of secularization in one form or another, and attempted to interpret this most basic experience of the modern world by constructing conceptual schemes and fitting historical data into them (see Matthes 1967, pp. 74, 89, etc.). Among the "founding fathers" of the discipline who did their pioneering work around the turn of the century, Durkheim was, generally speaking, less interested in change and history and more interested in the problem of primitive religions. Accordingly, the above observation by Matthes is not fully pertinent in his case, but it certainly is with regard to Weber, one of whose fundamental concerns was to elucidate the relationship between modern Western civilization and its religious background. To be sure, he did not often use the term "secularization." His key concept was "rationalization." Still, we have good reason to say that his research was, de facto, framed in terms of the secularization problem insofar as it focussed on the genesis of the modern world.

Seen from this angle, one of the factors leading to the emergence of sociology of religion as an intellectual activity was the experience of secularization in Western society, and actual researches were often carried out implicitly along these lines. It was not until the 1960s, however, that it became an explicit subject of discussion. As an illustration we can take the *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics* (*ERE*, vol. 11, published in 1920) or the second edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (*RGG*, published 1927-32). In both handbooks we find an article on "secularism," a militantly anti-religious movement initiated in the early nineteenth century by Holyoake, but none on "seculariza-

tion." Generally, the 1930s and 1940s may be regarded as a period of recession for the sociology of religion. Many factors, both internal and external, contributed to this recession, but after World War II the discipline underwent a time of resurgence though in a considerably different guise. As a number of writers have already pointed out, the post-war sociological studies of religion exhibit certain common features: on the one hand they are church-oriented sociologies of religion born of a crisis-consciousness on the part of established institutions; on the other, methodologically, they are almost exclusively positivistic in their collecting of detailed materials and in their avoidance of global, large-scale problems. This shift can be seen as part of the general trend among sociologists to move away from encyclopedic, universal science toward specialized fields of research.

In this situation several scholars, including Luckmann, around 1960 gradually began to voice their criticism of the church-oriented sociology of religion for its lack of theoretical perspectives, thereby seeking to reappropriate the achievements of the "classical" sociology of religion. As a result of this endeavor, the theme of religion once again came to occupy a central position in social theory as a whole, as it had been for Durkheim and Weber (see Hill 1973, p. 266; Rendtorff 1975). In this process of reorientation and its accompanying turmoil, the topic of secularization drew much attention. It was able to attain such a position of prominence because, as some writers claim, it was less liable to entail value-judgements and also had a wider coverage than terms like "Entkirchlichung" or "de-christianization." But, as we shall consider later on, it remains to be seen whether it really is a value-neutral and scientific concept. At any event, it must be noticed here that in the ensuing debate during the last decade or so, in contrast to the classical achievements, the emphasis has been more on the religious situation in contemporary societies than on the interpretation of their

historical heritages.

In this "secularization controversy," needless to say, such a variety of views has been propounded that one is almost completely at a loss to find any points of congruence among them. If there is any agreement at all, perhaps it is the general recognition that the present age is one of radical change in the societal and cultural life of mankind, a change so radical that it has no precedents in history, and in the recognition that religion as traditionally understood is being affected and undergoing fundamental changes. Such being the case, it seems extremely hard, indeed virtually impossible, to give an overall survey of the diverging views and draw some conclusions therefrom. For the purpose of discussion, however, let me propose a schematic classification even at the risk of oversimplifying them.

Fundamentally, the views of sociologists of religion concerning the contemporary religious situation may be divided into two major groups: the "decline theory" and the "permanence theory" of religion (see Nakamaki 1978, pp. 26-29). The distinction, in the last analysis, rests on whether religion is conceived of as being in principle capable of declining and, finally, disappearing; the former affirms this while the latter rejects it. Broadly speaking, the former has an empirical orientation, defining religion primarily in terms of its social forms and emphasizing the fact that its traditional functions are now being taken over by other agencies (e.g., the government, science, etc.). The most typical representative of this stance is Bryan Wilson (see Wilson 1976a, 1976b). Certainly, he admits that religion persists in various forms and continues to exercise certain functions and that from time to time new religious movements emerge. Yet for him they are only of peripheral importance, nothing but episodic events left out of the mainstream of the ongoing rationalization of life.

By contrast, the basic view point of the "permanence

theory" is close to that of sociology of knowledge: it stresses the function of religious symbol systems rather than its external features, and adopts an interpretive approach. On these premises the fact that traditional religious systems and institutions are currently involved in a far-reaching process of transformation, which evidently cannot be ignored, does not necessarily imply a possible decline of religion as such, but only its change. For religiousness is a part of human nature and, in this sense, a residual, that is, permanent category. Yinger's statement that at present religion is only de-supernaturalized, not secularized (Yinger 1970, p. 533; cf. pp. vii, 32-34), or Bellah's dictum that what is usually called secularization is nothing but the decline of the external control system of religion (Bellah 1970, p. 227) are the best formulations of this standpoint. But if old forms of religion are undergoing change, where are the new ones to be found? On this point, this second view may again be broken into two sub-types. The one suggests that the functions of integration and legitimation, long performed by traditional forms of religion, are now being taken over by public value systems or overarching beliefs. Bellah's idea of "civil religion" can be mentioned as an example of this type. The other possibility is that religion retains its function as a private system of meaning or becomes purely expressive. Luckmann and Fenn (see Luckmann 1967 and Fenn 1972) seem to advocate this view. Of course, what is given here is only a very rough scheme, and there may be intermediate forms. We can perhaps add that such a "polarizing" tendency itself is, as Berger has characterized it (see Berger 1967, pp. 133-135), a reflection of the contemporary religious situation.

Structure of the problem and some related issues. An intensive treatment of the problem of secularization in sociology of religion and science of religion is, as the above outline has

tried to show, of relatively recent date. Due firstly to its long history since the seventeenth centrury and, secondly, to theological considerations, both positive and negative, carried out in parallel with recent studies, the term has now become so heavily laden with nuances and ideological implications that we cannot help asking if it is adequate as a technical term in our discipline. Given this ambiguity, it seems almost desirable, as Martin once suggested (see Martin 1969 etc.), to banish the word altogether. But, as this seems hardly practicable (the fact that we are discussing it is the best evidence), an alternative may be to analyze the structure of the problem and try to bring at least some degree of clarity into the discussion.

One of the characteristic features of the concept of secularization is to be found in its multi-layeredness and amazingly great elasticity. On the one hand it refers to the concrete facts and historical processes which have been and still are taking place around us; on the other it serves to express certain interpretations about these processes. This elasticity was achieved by the usual means of analogical application. Through this means the term, originally used in a rather limited sense to designate legal-political procedures of transference of material property from religious bodies (churches) to the hands of non-religious authorities (confiscations, etc.), was made to cover other spheres of social and cultural life and to refer to an alleged decrease in the influence of religion there. (Similar multi-layeredness can also be found in such concepts as "modernization" or "rationalization," which refer both to material and spiritual spheres and have a close connection with "secularization.") In addition, the concept functions as a medium for ideological factors in the sense of either positive or negative evaluations of the factual process. Matthes quite probably made the same point when he distinguished between the "*experience* of secularization" and the "*thesis* of secularization." According to

him, the latter is based on primary experiences by various people but, at the same time, is incorporated with partial theorizing about them and also connected with diverse goal-settings. Adopting an expression originally coined by René König, he called it a kind of "practical theory" or, in a still different formulation, a "zeitgeschichtliches Interpretament" (Matthes 1967, pp. 77-88). If this in fact is the case, it would be an interesting and worthwhile task to analyze it and lay bare the roots from which it stems, just as it is to study the phenomena in detail. In short, it would be a task to be assigned to intellectual history and to criticism of ideologies.

The practical use of such a thesis consists first of all in its implication that it supposedly enables one to locate contemporary society in a large-scale historical process by contrasting it with the past before the onset of secularization. The allegedly non-secular past is quite often idealized in such a way as to assume the features of a Utopia or Golden Age of religion (cf. Martin 1966) and is sustained by a keen sense of present crisis, thus inducing its users to identify contemporary changes with the decline of religion. Conversely, as in the thinkers of the Enlightenment and of the nineteenth century, the process may be positively evaluated as bringing about an increase of both intellectual and practical freedom for mankind. Moreover, what is important in this context is the fact that in such arguments pro and con, the process called secularization is often considered to take place on a global scale and with a certain amount of necessity. In other words, one implicitly assumes a sort of historical law. Secularization, it is argued, is nothing other than a concomitant phenomenon of the worldwide trend toward industrialization, bureaucratization, and rationalization. Since it is everywhere the same, secularization with all its consequences must occur also in non-Western societies (as an example of such a reasoning, see Berger 1967, pp. 156, 171, etc.). It is by no means self-evident, however,

that this kind of generalization is legitimate and fits in with individual cases. It is more of a hypothetical conjecture than a verified conclusion.

As I have repeatedly suggested, the heart of the problem of secularization is how to interpret the place and function of religion in contemporary societies. The difficulty of finding an unequivocal answer to this question rests on the circumstance that the research results depend not only on what empirical data – or, more precisely, what parts of them – one bases his work on, but also on what theoretical premises one brings to his work. One such premise is the definition of religion, another the view of history. These are not merely instruments or frameworks of research, though of course they are these, but are closely related to and reflect a highly abstract and also evaluative view of man and the world held by the scholars themselves. It may also be called a "metatheory" insofar as it lies behind scientific theories as such and constitutes their foundation (see Swyngedouw 1978b, p. 42).

Thus, the problem of secularization, along with many other issues of a more or less similar nature, may be regarded as including at least three different dimensions or levels: (1) the descriptive level, dealing primarily with various facts or phenomena of change taking place in the religious organizations or consciousness, (2) the interpretive or theoretical level corresponding to the above, which can itself be differentiated into heuristic and justificatory elements according to whether the context is one of discovery or legitimation.[3]

3. Among the technical terms of the science of religion, "animism" is another example having nearly the same structure and showing a great deal of ambiguity. It is used on the one hand to designate the factual "belief in spiritual beings," which certainly can be found in abundance both in the past and at present, but, on the other, to refer to the complex of theories or interpretations proposed to explain these facts, notably by Tylor. Here, as in the problem of secularization, describing the facts is one thing, explaining or interpreting them another.

These two, we can say, constitute scientific inquiry proper in their interdependence and correlation. Such an inquiry, however, is related to and ultimately founded directly or indirectly upon (3) the metatheoretical level. Personally I *believe* this to be the structure of any scientific undertaking, including sociology of religion. To some people, this may seem problematic since it calls the "objectivity" of science into question. So long as we remain within the realm of science, the statements and judgements we make have to be restricted to the limits of possibility of correlation, in some form or other, among empirically verifiable data, that is, they must always remain relative and not usurp the status of an absolute law. At best they are only empirical generalizations. On the other hand, however, metatheoretical elements in scientific inquiry cannot be fully eliminated since man, including the researcher, is by nature destined to have some understanding of himself and the world around him, that is, a Weltanschauung.

How the fundamental assumptions, theoretical and metatheoretical, of a scholar affect the interpretation of data can be clearly illustrated in regard to the two basic views concerning secularization, the "decline theory" and the "permanence theory." The same or approximately the same observable facts – such as the decrease of influence of traditional religions (in the West, primarily the churches), the transposition of their functions to other agencies both public and private, the emergence of new groups, etc. – are interpreted by the former as symptoms signifying the retreat and, possibly, decline of religion, while for the latter they only show a change in the forms of religion. In short, the conclusions of the studies are determined *not exclusively* by their empirical grounds, but *simultaneously* by their respective premises. As to the decline theory, its basic orientation is rather descriptive (at certain points, to be sure, not completely). It defines religion mostly in terms of its

external features and formulates judgements about the contemporary situation on this basis. Against this, the critique by Glasner may be pertinent, to the effect that the error of identifying change with decline can occur only when employing the descriptive "language of sources" of historians in sociological discourses of which the language is, or ought to be, propositional (Glasner 1977, pp. 4-7). What we have designated the permanence theory, on the other hand, is ultimately derived from a view of human nature in which religiousness, of whatever form and degree, is an indispensable, constitutive part. This of course is not an empirically substantiated proposition. Rather, it is a philosophical vision conceived of in an a priori way. Here, instead of formulating a critique, let us quote Berger's comment on Luckmann's presuppositions. Characterizing Luckmann's approach as one that in an almost Durkheimian manner equates religion with the human and the social tout court, he observes: "It is one thing to point up the anthropological foundations of religion in the human capacity for self-transcendence, quite another to equate the two" (Berger 1967, p. 177).

Having analyzed the structure of the problem of secularization so far, I should now like to turn to a few related issues in an attempt to shed light on the topic from a slightly different perspective. They are, above all, the questions concerning the transhistorical and cross-cultural applicability of the concept of secularization.

At present, as Swyngedouw rightly remarks, "secularization" is used in the first place to refer to the process of change occurring in traditional religious expressions in contemporary society. This is quite natural since the contemporary situation is the primary object which can be approached in empirical, positivistic terms by sociology of religion (in distinction from social history). But the matter is a bit different when it comes to determining the terminus

a quo of such a process of change. The question cannot be put aside because the concept of "secularization" has an intrinsic reference to the flow of time called history, and hence necessitates some comparison with preceding periods. In this point there are divergent opinions. Sorokin, for instance, suggested that the secularization of social, individual, and cultural life in Europe first appeared during the twelfth century (Sorokin 1966). Hill, to cite just one other example, went even further back: he maintained that the initial onset of secularization might be regarded as having happened in the fourth century after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity. The acceptance of the church as an established religion by the Roman Empire, he contends, led to a lowering of the degree of commitment of the members which had been maintained because of its minority character, and later called forth various protest movements aiming at a virtuoso religiosity like that of medieval monasticism or modern evangelism (see Hill 1973, pp. 232-234).

In the last-mentioned example, "secularization" is applied not only to the objective, institutional aspect but also to the subjective aspect of religious life. What is important about this view, in addition, seems to be the fact that by putting the origin so far back, it by implication opens up the way for a transhistorical use of the term. Indeed, as Reicke has shown with regard to European history (see Reicke 1961), secularization in the objective-legal sense of transference of control over material property from the hands of religious organizations to secular, political authorities took place already in ancient times and was repeated thereafter. In other words, it is a process which may occur irrespective of the age. Moreover, though this is more difficult to demonstrate, the absence of religious motivations or attitudes is not necessarily a phenomenon peculiar to the modern and contemporary periods. (Maybe we had better call this

phenomenon "secularity" instead of "secularization.") A case in point is that of primitive man or society. Some scholars, notably Eliade (see Eliade 1957), have described primitives as if they all were deeply religious. It is clear, however, that this is a gross oversimplification. Already several decades ago Radin asserted that in primitive societies, too, there are men of different temperaments: skeptics alongside the religiously-minded (see Radin 1927). Recently, the same view has been put forward once more by Douglas, who indicated that since among the primitives every variety of materialism and skepticism can be found together with religious outlooks, the distinction between modern and traditional or primitive has nothing to do with the contrast between secular and religious (see Douglas 1973, p. 36).

Understood in this way, "secularization" both in its objective and subjective forms becomes a technical term to designate a characteristic process which may and in fact did occur repeatedly in any given society and culture. Put differently, it is a universal process irrespective of time and place. In the sociologies of religion written in the 1940s by Wach (see Wach 1944) or Mensching (see Menshing 1947, 2nd rev. ed. 1968), whose basic orientation was comparative-typological rather than purely sociological in the more specialized sense, the word was employed as a general term, in marked contrast to the tendency among sociologists of religion today to restrict its application to modern countries. In this connection, incidentally, the treatment of the subject by Ratschow deserves attention as an attempt to bridge the two viewpoints. He distinguished between "latent" and "acute" secularizations and showed that, while the former together with some sub-types of the latter are universally recognizable phenomena, the "totalitarian" secularization of life due to the Enlightenment since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must be regarded as a unique historical event (see Ratschow 1961).

Here we are confronted with a basic difference in the approaches of various sociologies of religion: comparative-typological versus historical-specialized, religio-scientific versus sociological in the narrower sense. And here also we encounter a fundamental difficulty inherent in the problem of secularization. Applying the concept to diverse phenomena, both past and present, in a neutral, a-historical, universal manner, as did Wach and Mensching, almost inevitably results in a weakening and finally a loss of its interpretive power (Aussagekraft) in relation to the present-day situation (on this point, see Fürstenberg 1961, col. 1028; Rendtorff 1966, p. 55). From a certain point of view, this may seem too big a loss, especially when one considers the circumstance that the classical achievement of Weber owes its lasting influence to its penetrating insights – not to say predictions – about the trends of the modern world. On the other hand, however, we should take care not to overemphasize the significance of the modern and contemporary situation and claim it as unique in the history of mankind. In this connection, Robertson's warning against the inclination he calls "presentism" seems especially to the point (Robertson 1970, p. 240). For man is after all a self-centered being and tends to stress the importance of things, both in space and time, nearer to him, and the sociologist of religion can be no exception to this rule. More concretely, the discussion of secularization quite often, if not always, is accompanied by a sense of crisis as regards the present age. But is not every period of history a transition and hence a crisis? For an adequate treatment of the problem of secularization, I would contend, a way must be sought to synthesize somehow the wide, comparative perspective with a keen awareness of historical change.

The question whether the concept of secularization can be transhistorically applied overlaps to some extent that of whether its cross-cultural use is possible and legitimate.

Both share a common structure and exhibit similar features. Admittedly, the concept and problem of secularization itself came to be formulated during the process of modernization of European countries, and can be fully appreciated only against the background of this experience. Most Western scholars, even when asking whether there is any "autochthonous parallel" in Asian or African societies, end up with a negative answer (see, for example, Hoekendijk 1961). Or, to cite another example, in a recent book Martin explicitly states that secularization has been first of all a Christian phenomenon, and that this process has been exported with modifications to other societies (see Martin 1978, pp. 1-2). A critical recognition of this fact, surely, is a welcome tendency, since it helps to avoid the errors, so often committed also in the study of religion, of making hasty generalizations from a limited number of historical cases and elevating them to the status of a model.

Scholars of Japanese religion, at the same time, seem to realize increasingly that in Japan as a non-Western society the theoretical models derived from Western societies cannot be meaningfully applied. We have already seen that Hori Ichirō remained rather reserved or even skeptical about the possibility of talking about "secularization" in the history of Japanese religion, even though he was one of the first to introduce the term into the Japanese academic vocabulary. This negative response, certainly, was not without connection with his basic interest in the substratum of Japanese religiosity which he called "folk religion" (*minkan shinkō*), and with his inclination to see continuity rather than change in history. More recently, Yanagawa and Abe have brought forth, though from a slightly different angle, an even more powerful challenge to Western sociological theories, thus calling the cross-cultural applicability of the concept of secularization into serious doubt. Pointing out the peculiar nature of Japanese religion, which does not place much emphasis

on belief and hence admits a high degree of syncretism, they argue that it cannot be explained in terms of the church-oriented concept of religion of the West. If there is any parallel development comparable to the secularization in Christian countries, according to them, it surely is not the decline of institutionalized religions but the change occurring in the institution of the *ie* or household and its accompanying ancestor worship (see Yanagawa and Abe 1978, pp. 8, 24, 33-34). Since, broadly speaking, the *ie* system has not been the sole foundation of Japanese society and there have been, alongside and partly overlapping it, community forms of life both on local and national levels, it is not enough to direct our attention toward ancestor worship alone. With this modification, however, their argument may be readily endorsed.

There is no denying the fact that these institutions in Japan are undergoing changes just as radical as those of Christian churches or other organizations in Western societies. And perhaps the traditional value-system of Japanese society is also currently involved in some kind of transformation, though in a way that is more subtle and harder to demonstrate (cf. Swyngedouw 1976, 1978a). But how and why? And does this change, if it can be identified, mean a decline of religion or not? Here we are again brought back to our starting point and confronted with a series of open questions to be investigated in future.

In these pages, I have confined myself to pointing out a few issues that seem especially important when approaching the problem of secularization within the framework of sociology of religion or science of religion in general. Due to the nature of the paper, some of them could be only briefly touched on or merely hinted at without being fully explored. If this humble contribution can be of any help in stimulating discussion, I will be more than gratified.

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