

The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies

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Religious consciousness in modern industrial societies is determined by two basic social conditions. One is the privatization of individual existence and the other is cultural pluralism. The two conditions are closely interrelated and originate in the institutional specialization of functions in modern social structures. A sketch of the historical origins of modern industrial societies shows a peculiar constellation in the West: for various reasons institutional specialization of religion coexisted for a certain time with something approaching social universality of religion. With growing social differentiation this transitory conjunction came to an end and was followed by a privatization of religious consciousness that is the correlate of the privatization of individual life and cultural pluralism. It is a question of how severely this peculiarity of the Western "model" of the relation of religion and modernity limits the applicability of the general account of the structural conditions of religious consciousness in modern societies given in this paper.

Any systematic attempt to describe and understand that which is rather uncertainly called "modern religious consciousness" (it is perhaps preferable to speak of religious consciousness in modern societies) must not prejudge the possibility that religious consciousness in modern societies is in no specific way itself modern. It must therefore rely upon a method that is historical and comparative. The social scientist who looks at religion and its subjective manifestations without the detachment which such a method ideally provides runs a

double risk. He may be easily taken in by the claims to uniqueness, historical or otherwise, which in our times so tritely accompany manifestations of the familiar. And his analysis, indeed his very perception may be all too readily distorted by his own time-bound enthusiasms or revulsions. A sociological analysis of religious consciousness in modern societies should thus begin by specifying the general social conditions for the basic aspects of religious consciousness in *any* society. A general theory or, to put it more modestly, a general account of the social conditions of religion and the manifestations of religious consciousness provides a necessary starting point for a search for those features in modern society that could be linked to whatever might possibly be specifically modern rather than universal about its religious consciousness.

I take up a central strand in the social theory of religion by venturing to suggest that the general social condition of religion in all societies and at all times is the relation of the social order to the individual beings who become human persons by growing up in it. I suggest further that the relation of the individual to the social order is determined by the conjunction of certain elementary features of human consciousness and certain general aspects of a given form of social organization. No doubt both human consciousness and social organization have a phylogeny that goes far back into our primate and even mammal ancestry. Yet human social structures have become historical; in part they have become emancipated from simple phylogenetic determination. They are the result of purposive as well as blind, of individual as well as collective human *action*. As action is motivated and shaped by consciousness, social structures are ossifications, as it were, of the human mind. Need one add that social structures, in turn, shape human consciousness into what it is at a given time and place? The consequence of this is that the relation of the individual and the social order, although determined by social structure, is historically variable and thus, in the

last analysis, an inscription of human consciousness on the tablets of history.

Modern society, the individual, and their relationship. Are any systematic changes to be discerned in this relation? Can one specify this relation in such a manner that concrete historical and cultural differences in the structure and function of religion and in the forms, perhaps even contents, of religious consciousness can be better understood? At the risk of some oversimplification I hold that there has been an important, even radical transformation in the relation of the individual to the social order and that this transformation resulted in concomitant changes in religious consciousness. The change from archaic, primitive, traditional and, less radically, from pre-industrial modern times to our contemporary situation in which industrial, bureaucratic and capitalist principles of social organization (in its several varieties from West to East) are dominant, is characterized by the emergence of what may be parsimoniously called privatization of personal existence. Accompanying this is the privatization of the sacred cosmos.

Without an understanding of this process it is difficult if not impossible to grasp those features of religious consciousness which cannot be easily subsumed under universal or, at least, familiar aspects of religion and may, perhaps, represent genuinely modern aspects of religious consciousness. An understanding of the emergence of the privatization of existence requires an appreciation of the general social transformations that led to the rise of modern industrial societies. Since Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber, the outline of this development is well known, although widely different interpretations and evaluations were placed on it by these fathers of modern social theory as well as by the generations that followed them. I shall therefore sketch the outline of this development as briefly and concisely as is possible under

these circumstances. But it may be helpful if I begin by summarizing the results of these transformations, inasmuch as they are directly significant for the problem under consideration.

The basic determinants of the relation of the individual human being to the modern social order are of two kinds. They are social-structural and determine his mode of being and acting in society; and they are cultural and shape his consciousness in a more direct fashion. They must be seen as operating in conjunction.¹ The specifically modern *social-structural* determinants of the individual mode of being are the result of differentiation of the social structure. This process led to the formation of several specialized institutional domains with a typical preponderance of the economic domain over the other areas and a bureaucratic organization of the specialized domains. Of particular significance here is the institutional specialization of religion in the industrial societies of the West.² The basic *cultural* factor in the shaping of individual consciousness in modern societies is the prevalence of cultural "pluralism." This is the consequence of a weakening of the internal cohesion of the world views that are transmitted

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1. It is difficult to assess precisely what weight is to be attached to each of the two kinds of factors considered in isolation. On that level of generality and abstraction, the question may be irresolvable in any case. There can be little doubt, however, that the segmentation of the social structure into specialized institutional domains was a major social cause of cultural "pluralism." And although it is sometimes risky to move from genetic priority to the assumption of functional dominance, one may here safely join the majority of social scientists who would assign a central role to structural differentiation in most aspects of modern social life.
 2. I cannot say to what extent the special features of industrialization and the uniqueness of cultural history in non-Western industrial nations, and especially in Japan, make for significant differences in this matter. Even a sociologist with little knowledge of Japanese society and religion will see that there is no close parallel in Japan to the high degree of institutional specialization of religion in the industrial societies of the West. The situation in the modernizing nations such as India, with the persistence of archaic religious elements in the caste system and the peculiar cultural institutionalization of personal charisma in the "guru-system" is different again. The general applicability of an account based on an analysis of Western industrial societies is therefore a matter for discussion.

and legitimated socially and the replacement of hierarchical principles of cultural organization by market principles.

The concept of religion in functionalist perspective. But now we must return to the beginning. I shall try to sketch the general background for the emergence of those conditions which are linked to religious consciousness in modern societies. I shall not try, however, to present a general account of the evolutionary and historical problems involved in the relation of individuals to a social order, nor shall I reformulate, in detail, an analysis of the general anthropological "function" of religion which is a logical implication of that account.³

Nonetheless, in an account of this kind one cannot ignore a serious terminological difficulty which arises from a functional view of religion, the view which I intend to adopt. This terminological difficulty has methodological and theoretical consequences. I must therefore insert a few words on this issue. Most attempts to analyze the relation of religion to social change and certainly almost all attempts to relate religion to modernity suffer from a historically and culturally narrow view of what religion is. Curiously, few scholars hesitate to acknowledge the presence of religion in certain instances where such a label would not mean much, if anything, to the members of the societies under scrutiny, with one exception, that of modern industrial societies, especially Western industrial societies. This is probably a direct consequence of the popular and sociological myths of secularization and the firm association of religion with its traditionally dominant institutional forms. But historians and cultural anthropologists describe the religion of societies in which religion has no distinct institutional bases. They have no difficulty in discerning a religious component in the culture as a whole. To be sure, not all cultures contain a distinct supernatural level, although many do. But in all cultures there is

3. These problems were treated at some length in several publications of mine.

an internal organization of the view of the world, of life, of crises, of ordinary things that relates the elements of that view to each other in an ordered, more or less hierarchical fashion. This applies both to the more "theoretical" elaborations of the culture and its pretheoretical common basis. There are norms that bestow some "ultimate" significance on ordinary experiences and legitimate them as well as the crises that interrupt everyday life. A certain, although variable degree of bipolarity characterizes all cultures, and we have here an essential dimension of the general analysis of religion. It is obvious that norms of "ultimate" significance are not segregated from the cognitive and affective dimensions of ordinary experience with equal sharpness in all societies. As Durkheim, among others, has shown, it is an important question to ask to what extent and in what way a culture is bisected or otherwise divided into a sacred and profane part. Another closely connected although not identical question is whether the sacred universe is firmly entrenched in everyday life, blending with it inconspicuously or in ritualized enclaves, or is clearly set apart, socially as well as culturally.

This leads us to the next question. A second and highly important dimension in the study of religion is the social basis of the sacred universe. As part of the culture the sacred reality is evidently maintained and transmitted by social processes and by means of institutional regulation of some sort. We may envisage two basic kinds of arrangements with intermediate forms. One consists in a general maintenance and transmission of the sacred universe where its social basis is the entire social structure. In this case the sacred reality is diffused among the various parts and institutions of society. There may be differences in the social distribution of the sacred reality, especially generational and sexual ones, but these differences are not structurally "necessary." At all events, religion has a general social foundation in the sense that it pervades the kinship system, the division of labor, and

the exercise of power. On the subjective side, the meaning of all ordinary conduct, insofar as it is defined and sanctioned by social institutions, is linked either directly or indirectly to that extra-ordinary sacred reality. Sacred norms – collective representations with a sacred quality – legitimate conduct in a great variety of social situations and bestow some “ultimate” dimension of meaning on all the relevant stages of individual life. Consequently, there is nothing – whether of economy, kinship, or political organization – that one would want to know about such societies that can be fully understood without reference to their religion. To put it in abstract terms: culture and social structure and the individual are congruent to a high degree, although of course never fully.

A different kind of arrangement consists in the specialization of religious functions in a distinct set of institutions. One may visualize an intermediate form in which religious functions are drawn fully into the sphere of one institutional system, for example, that of politics or the family or combinations of the two. Yet the case of interest in the study of modern society is the full specialization of religious functions in highly visible organizational forms which tend to be given the label “religious” or some equivalent designation which clearly marks it off from other forms of social life. One particular set of institutions now transmits and supports the sacred reality exclusively.

It is evident that these observations are no longer merely terminological. We have entered the construction of ideal-typical constructs which are to aid us in approaching religious phenomena in societies with radically different types of social organization. The first arrangement is clearly the kind with which we approach archaic and primitive societies, looking for the degree of “fit” between the theoretical construct and empirical aspects of society and culture. With the construct of the second kind or arrangement we may try to analyze

modern industrial societies. The intermediate type obviously refers to classical and premodern traditional civilizations. Let us now look more closely at the second type using the other two merely by way of rough contrast without detailed analysis. We will consider the key features of the relation of the individual human being to the dominant social order.

Institutional specialization. The differentiation of the social structure into institutionally specialized domains is not to be taken as the result of unilinear evolution. It is the product of *one* line of historical development which, for various reasons, took on a fateful universal significance. In archaic societies institutions of social life are characterized by what Redfield calls "primitive fusion." This term aptly describes the fact that what people do in such societies cannot be neatly fitted into institutional categories. The institutions are "fused" into the social life of the community. In archaic societies economic, kinship, political and religious functions form dimensions of fairly unitary social action – unitary in their meaning to the participants. These functions are rather sharply segregated in overt fact and intrinsic meaning in modern industrial societies. This is what we may call institutional specialization. The functional subsystems are not entirely independent but tend to follow their own, "functionally rational" norms. Although this "functional rationality" usually meant bureaucratic organization and although it had a marked economic articulation in the development of modern capitalism, the norms of one domain are not directly connected and certainly not transferable to another domain. The meaning systems of the institutions are not person-related but uncompromisingly function-bound. This means, of course, that the norms of the non-religious areas are removed from any overarching religious significance.

Institutional specialization of religion was thus part of an encompassing process of social change and did not occur in

isolation as a consequence of intrinsically "religious" processes. If the "logic" of a sacred universe constituted the dominant or, at least, official and rhetorical "logic" of all institutions in archaic and traditional societies, things have changed radically in modern society. In traditional civilizations, it is true, certain institutions already tended toward functional specialization. Increasing complexity of the division of labor, the production of a surplus over the subsistence minimum, growth of supra-communal and supra-tribal political organization, emergence of distinct occupational roles, and the formation of social classes were processes connected with functional differentiation. Yet the "logic" of a sacred reality continued to support and legitimate the entire social structure. Perhaps somewhat more rhetorically than in archaic societies, it also joined together the meanings of the most diverse actions so that they formed coherent passages in the life of the individual and so that they were integrated with the life of the community. Very little or nothing of that remains in modern industrial societies.

Those aspects of individual existence which are bound to the "big" specialized institutional domains of social life, the economy and the polity, are determined by the "objective" determinants of institutional function and bureaucratic organization. That part of individual existence thus tends to be highly anonymous. No doubt human beings are able to create rather more highly personal niches for themselves than the institutional "imperatives" would seem to allow. Nonetheless, highly specialized economic and political institutions, taking on the character of a "second nature" or an "iron cage," to use two famous metaphors, objectively determine the form and content of much of people's everyday life even if they manage to build little worlds of their own within the areas of their existence that are preempted by the big institutions.

Archaic societies consisted of a highly structured pattern

of face-to-face relations with a low degree of anonymity. The typical relation of the individual to the social order was a relation to other persons. Classical and traditional pre-modern civilizations, on the other hand, developed centralized political institutions. Although these were embedded at least symbolically into personalized, dynastic, feudal or similar patterns, they already showed a considerable amount of bureaucratic organization and anonymity of social relations in the political, urban, and regional economic spheres. The kinship system, however, was still the principle of the integration of action and meaning in an individual's life; the family was still a unit of production and consumption and, typically, accompanied by sacred connotations. Social life in the folk communities that were "unified" in these civilizations was still basically face-to-face and personal. This was the structural basis for the fact that the "logic" of the sacred reality managed to integrate both communal and individual life with some degree of success.

The functional specialization of institutions which characterizes modern industrial societies has subjective consequences that present a rather different face. Anonymously defined, highly interchangeable role-performances prevail in the ordinary occupational life of the majority of the population. The role-performances are defined according to the functional "logic" of the institutional domain. This is a "logic" which tends to make sense even to the individual actor – but he has difficulty making sense of it in other areas of his life, or accommodating it in his total biography. The structural irrelevance of the person is a many-faceted and ambivalent phenomenon. Yet one of its most important consequences is that an incongruence of a rather profound nature arises between the individual and the social order in which he lives. The "objective" anonymous performances which fill major segments of an individual's existence are important for the continued existence of the society; they

have, we may say, structural functions. But they tend to be increasingly less meaningful to the individual – although not unimportant. They are “objectively” necessary for him, too – but for purposes that have little or nothing to do with his performance and a great deal to do with his private existence as a person and in connection with “side-bets,” to borrow an apt concept from Howard Becker. Role performances are of course structurally “functional” in all societies. But the degree of anonymization of these performances, resulting from institutional specialization, and the degree of subjective meaninglessness of vast areas of social life is an exclusive property of modern industrial societies. Social structure, culture, and personal existence form three rather loosely connected dimensions of the social order. It is this state of affairs which may be described as privatization of personal existence, and it is this state of affairs which is the structural basis for whatever may be modern in religious consciousness in our time.

Specialized and socially diffuse religion. Let us now turn back again for a moment and consider the rather peculiar turn which the institutional specialization of religion took in the West. Religion generally, although perhaps not inevitably, comes to be specialized institutionally in societies that are marked by a high degree of structural complexity. In such societies religion is not generally and successfully transmitted in the basic socialization procedures. Such societies, I think one may safely say, cannot be characterized by social universality of religion. The latter presupposes a highly integrated, not markedly differentiated social structure and is linked to a pattern of life based primarily on face-to-face social relations. Its persistence requires fairly homogeneous socialization procedures. Yet for an important and almost surprisingly long period in the development of the modern Western societies, institutional specialization of religion was

combined with something that closely approximated social universality of religion. How did this peculiar constellation come about?

By the time the Western Empire collapsed, the Christian religion had already achieved a high degree of institutional specialization. In the historical background there was the sharp segregation of a sacred cosmos in ancient Israel, accompanied by an unprecedented demythologization and depersonalization of nature. There was a cosmopolitan pluralism of world views. Specifically religious communities proliferated everywhere. Political and economic institutions had also achieved a certain autonomy. In the post-Constantinian age, the sacred reality was held in monopoly by theological and administrative experts who systematized the doctrine and standardized the ritual. Then came a period of reversals in the development of a highly differentiated social order. Throughout the early Middle Ages the economy moved back to simpler levels of organization, and politics was "retribalized." The Christian sacred cosmos, however, retained its organizational basis as an institutionally specialized form of religion. No serious challenge arose to it from within as long as Christianity provided a universal principle for the legitimation of new institutions.

Religion had thus retained a high degree of institutional specialization while the political and economic domains had not yet achieved – or regained – autonomy from the sacred cosmos. It is this unique and transitory historical situation which is mistaken by the contemporary myths of secularization for a lasting structural arrangement between society and religion. Obviously, that myth left its imprint on the sociological view of religion to this day and may cloud our view of religious consciousness in modern societies.

From structural transformation to cultural pluralism. Looking back, we should be able to see the *intrinsic* instability of

this arrangement. Bitter jurisdictional disputes between the institutional domains mark the transition from the middle ages to the modern era. The emancipation of power and the centralization of administrative control, the growth of cities, the contact with alien civilizations, the rediscovery of ancient systems of values and of knowledge, the peculiarly Western blend of science and technology, and the rise of modern capitalism transformed the basic structure of society. One of the most important consequences of these developments was to hedge in sacred realities. Religion could be and was increasingly perceived as the ideology of an institutional subsystem. Its jurisdiction over matters of "ultimate" concern was restricted to matters that could be of "ultimate" concern to the "private individual" only. The most important link of the sacred universe to the world of everyday life was broken. Religious institutions maintained their massive presence in society as highly visible institutions but suffered a sharp restriction of the jurisdiction of their norms. The "secular" segments of the social structure developed pragmatic norms whose actual (or assumed) tendency toward "functional rationality" justified the liberation of the institutional domains from the values embodied in the traditional sacred cosmos. Numerous, potentially competitive systems of ideas came into existence, each tied to a social basis of its own.

This development took another peculiar turn in the nineteenth century. As the traditional sacred cosmos ceased to infuse wide areas of everyday life with anything like coherent significance, certain values that originated in the context of political and economic processes, of conflict and change, gained entry into the increasingly more permeable sacred reality of industrial societies. Political and economic ideologies, expressing first the aspirations and then the vested interests of the bourgeoisie, often in combination with rising nationalism or articulating later the hopes of the proletariat, either merged with or replaced the dominant Christian themes.

This development helped to reinforce the already existing tendency toward cultural "pluralism," a tendency that originated in the jurisdictional disputes accompanying institutional specialization.

The reality of "ultimate" significance in the contemporary industrial societies of the West is quite heterogeneous and contains themes that originated in the "secular" segments of the social structure. To be sure, specialized religious institutions retained their monopoly on the traditional themes in the sacred universe. But for several generations the traditional sacred cosmos was no longer the only transcendent symbolic reality that was mediated in social processes to broad strata of the population. It competed with varying success with nationalism, egalitarian socialism, and various totalitarian ideologies. Thus the conditions under which religious institutions entered into various kind of arrangements with other institutional domains were radically altered.

The structural consistency of the world view, connecting in a plausible way sacred realities with everyday routines, is seriously weakened. There is no one "official" model of a sacred universe. Traditionally religious versions compete with new religious forms. More importantly, they compete with models of socialization that contain no *specifically* religious representations, although they do contain norms that are potentially of "ultimate" significance to members of contemporary societies. These are derived primarily from various mixtures of nationalism and egalitarianism.

But as we shifted from consideration of transformations in the social structure to a consideration of the basic aspects of cultural "pluralism," we must now return to a description of those structural changes which directly influenced the relation of the individual to the social order.

The social transformation of religious consciousness. In all societies values and orientations that can be "ultimately"

significant for the individual are transmitted in social processes. In premodern societies these processes tend to reinforce one another and thus what is a culturally rather well-integrated view of the world, in the first place, has a fair chance to become a formative structure of subjective consciousness. In modern industrial societies different values and orientations are of course still transmitted in social processes in structurally, mainly class-determined, variants of socialization. But they are not massively supported by the social order as a whole.⁴ What is transmitted in primary socialization is still basically determined by the class-location of the family. Yet even the well-known factors that one lumps under the headings of mobility, urbanism, anticipatory socialization, pluralism, and the like make for a relatively low degree of mutual reinforcement of these processes. But the most important consideration in this context is the structurally predetermined break between primary and secondary socialization. No variant of the world view, no specifically religious or explicitly non-religious view of life, holds a monopoly in secondary socialization. We have already discussed the roots of cultural "pluralism." Its subjective correlate is the high degree of "arbitrariness," of "bricolage" that characterizes modern consciousness and which, one may provisionally assume, finds

4. It may be instructive to compare this situation in the industrial societies of the West with the newly modernizing countries. There the values and orientations that are linked with traditional or imported nationalism, egalitarian socialism or fascism – as the case may be – tend to be given official social support. This should not be taken to mean that religion or something like religion is identical with nationalism, socialism, or fascism in modernizing countries. It does mean that these self-designated secular systems of "ultimate" significance are the ones that are likely to be systematically connected with the modernizing aspirations or opposition to modernization on the part of the ruling elites in these countries. They are therefore the only orientations of "ultimate" significance that are likely to have direct institutional support. On the other hand, the privatized forms of religion which are widely distributed in fully established modern societies, at least in those of the West, have not yet developed a broad structural base in modernizing countries. (These are observations which I tried to develop in a colloquium in the Center for Mediterranean Studies in 1976.)

no close analogy in traditional forms of cultural syncretism. This may be so because of its social location. It is at home in the privatized sphere of individual existence which is defused, structurally insignificant.

Another aspect of the situation which may be specifically modern is the relatively low degree of connectedness between the institutionally determined social existence of the individual and his (religious) consciousness. There is nothing like a mirroring of being in thought. The privatization of individual existence is socially determined as a general fact of modern life. But individual consciousness is not in any way directly modelled by the social structure – and that precisely for those reasons which led to privatization, that is, the irrelevance of the person to the social structure.

The privatization of individual existence is linked to the privatization of religion in general. As for religious themes one is tempted to say with some exaggeration: anything goes. In the global interpenetration of cultures, a vast – and by no means silent, although perhaps imaginary – museum of values, notions, enchantments, and practices has become available. It has become available “directly” but primarily through the filter of mass media rather than social relations. The choice is determined rather less by social conditions – although evidently they continue to play a kind of screening role – than by individual psychologies. Originally the statement “religion is a private matter” had a political meaning. Now it has an essentially psychological one.

Yet even if the general structural conditions make for a certain inherent solipsism of religious consciousness in modern societies, it would be presumptuous to assume that the results of a given kind of “bricolage” are not genuinely religious. And it would be downright silly for a sociologist to maintain that the degree of privatization of individual existence and consciousness and religion which characterizes the industrial societies of the West is incompatible with some form of

resocialization of religion and perhaps a subinstitutional resocialization of existence. It is becoming rather evident that this may take new – or at least seemingly new – forms of organization. It also may very well be that the traditional religious bodies, in a manner of speaking the monuments of institutional specialization, will insert themselves successfully into this social transformation of religious consciousness in modern societies.