

Richard K. FENN, *Liturgies and trials: The secularization of religious language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982. xxxiv + 215 pp. \$15.95.

IN OCTOBER OF 1983, a committee of the U.S. National Council of Churches released a "provisional and experimental" lectionary of biblical texts in which all exclusively male-oriented language is deleted. In this lectionary, "God the Father," an expression with alleged discriminatory overtones towards women, is changed into "God the Father and Mother," and "Son of God" has become the bisexual "Child of God."

Equality before God is certainly a virtue highly extolled in the Bible. But I would think that taking this fact as a pretext for changing "God the Father" into "God the Father and Mother" and making similar "improvements" raises many intricate problems. Do we really need to interpret the term "God the Father" in a strictly literal sense? And is religious language not made what it is precisely because it transcends literalism? To use Fenn's words, religious language is "eventful"; once it is uttered, something happens, something changes. When the meaning of religious speech is questioned in a way that goes beyond the confines of the religious community, however, it loses its theological frame and becomes exposed to secular attack. As a result, the metaphor "God the Father" loses its original meaning and becomes "God the Father and Mother," with sexual implications. Fenn has called attention to precisely this point in this volume.

Liturgies and trials is Fenn's second book. If we can call his *Toward a theory of secularization* (Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1978) a kind of prelude to his ideas on secularization, this volume can be regarded as a definite text. Although he deals here with religious liturgies and language, which are subjects different in content from his previous volume, his concerns are the same and he writes from a similar perspective.

As can be seen from both title and subtitle, the author's purpose is to elucidate the conflicts between the sacred (liturgies) and the secular (legal trials) in present-day society. One might have doubts, however, as to whether language offers the best means to analyze the secularized society. One can readily agree that social differentiation is grounded in the structural changes of social organization. But does religious language really provide us with a valuable standard for measuring this process of differentiation? Is it not rather a phenomenon incidental or concomitant to the differentiation process of social structures? Fenn, however, has this to say:

In analyzing closely the meaning that is conveyed as speakers translate their religious convictions into secular parlance in the class room or in the court, sociologists who understand religious speech will be better able to interpret what is gained and lost in these translations without contributing distortions and omissions of their own (p.xxxiv).

In other words, by analyzing the use of religious language in the secular context of schools or courts, the continuity and discontinuity between the religious community that sustains the meaning of that speech and the secular community can be made clear. Until now, analyses of secularization have focused on the relation between changes in social structures and religious groups. Fenn, however directs his attention to the problem of this relationship on the micro level rather than its implications on the macro level.

Fenn's study clarifies the manner by which liturgies and religious language are concretely dealt with in situations where social differentiation gives rise to a pluralism of values. The concept of secularization appeared as a central issue in the sociology of religion in the 1960s, and since that time a wealth of articles and books has been published about it. But even though this problem has aroused the interest of many scholars, the definition of

secularization has become a question of *tot capita tot sensus*, and now it has finally come to the point where scholars are making inventories and classifications of the plethora of different concepts of secularization. It is not altogether clear why so many meanings have been proposed for secularization. One reason for the phenomenon that might be pointed out, however, is the fact that the relations between religion and society on the one hand, and the relationships that are established through religion between society and the individual on the other hand, exist on a very abstract level. In the midst of this impasse in secularization theories, then, we should highly appreciate the fact that an author who has struggled with the problem for a long time has shunned the abstract and attempted to approach his topic by a more direct analysis in terms of concrete examples.

All this does not mean, however, that there are no problems in Fenn's approach. He consistently defends the position that contemporary society is witnessing a differentiation process within both its cultural and structural levels on the one hand, and between these levels on the other. He further argues that in this situation a pluralization of ultimate meaning systems is taking place instead of a moral consensus based on religious foundations which extend throughout society.

Although this question is not explicitly brought to the fore in the present volume, we can infer from the Karen Ann Quinlan case—one of the three court cases involving religion that Fenn deals with—that it is the fundamental point he wants to make in the development of his analysis. Even if, in this analysis, Fenn focuses on religious liturgies and language, therefore, it seems to me that in the long run all he has done is to substitute "religious language" for "religious organizations," and that this does not constitute a completely new perspective from which to observe the problem of the relationship between religion and society. Nor does it offer a new perspective from which to view the problem of the location of the individual in society through

an analysis of religion.

Fenn's attitude toward religion itself also seems to me to be questionable. The definition of religion almost always is a problem in arguing about secularization. Fenn's approach to religion here can be called philosophical/theological, and for me makes the book hard to understand. It also leads one to anticipate the development of a new research perspective. Moreover, one is reminded of the definition of the sacred made by Mircea Eliade when one encounters statements such as "prophetic religious language evokes a myth, a complex set of ideas and beliefs, rather than a clear and testable proposition" (p.117) or "when in religious discourse certain words are repeated, they have their original force" (p.93). On the one hand, I can detect in this an effort to come to the essence of religious liturgies and language. But when Fenn reaches the stage of referring, on the other hand, to religion in its relation to secularization, the differentiation and specialization of social structures are given preference, and the analysis of religion itself is left behind, with only a secondary meaning.

One reason for the stalemate in secularization theories is said to lie in the difficulty of coming up with a definition of religion or the sacred. If religion continues, as Luckmann argues, to offer us a key for the understanding of society and the individual in society, however, then I would think what we need is an ever better scientific understanding of what religion is and what it means. The present volume is in this respect doubtless a very suggestive and stimulating work that will direct the eyes of scholars to this direction.

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