

SECULARIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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1. Introduction

From the very beginning of sociology in the mid-19th century, the dominant concern was with the emergence of industrial society. Early sociologists had a lot to say about the significance of religion to this development and vice versa. They laid down a pattern of concepts and theoretical arguments which have tended to highlight a very limited number of reasons for regarding religion as an interesting topic for sociologists. The pattern is dominated by the theme of religion's eclipse by industrial society. In various ways, and with a bewildering variety of embellishments, social scientists have overwhelmingly framed religion as a topic of marginal and declining significance. Explanations for the downward trajectory of religion have taken many forms, but the ground-bass refers monotonously to aspects of industrialization and modernization. This lends an air of inevitability to the process which is conventionally called 'secularization'.

I do not intend to rehearse all the variations on the theme of secularization. But I will make a selection of particularly influential models of the process to gain a sense of the range of possibilities. There is also clearly continuity among the prominent variations. In this sense one could talk about theoretical traditions or schools. But the main focus of my remarks will be on recent attempts to find a way out of the labyrinthine intricacies of secularization theories. In other words, there are refreshing signs of a willingness in places to break the mould and to reformulate questions and perspectives in such a way that religion can be made interesting for reasons other than its alleged eclipse or demise.

I'm not sure that I want to go as far as claiming that a new paradigm is emerging in the sociology of religion (cf. Warner 1993). But I do want to argue that religion is being used as a resource in some new and challenging ways which are difficult to reconcile with conventional ideas of secularization.

Let us begin by sketching a few influential treatments of religion which are widely believed to support the idea of secularization.

Part 1: Secularization

2. Normative functionalism

The orthodox sociological theory in the USA and in many other parts of the English-speaking world between the 1950s and the early-1970s was shaped by Talcott Parsons's versions of systems theory. Human personalities, societies and cultures were assumed to be self-regulating systems which maintained stability and viability by efficiently combining goals, means, norms and values. Values are the most important components because they determine a system's orientation and *raison d'être*. Religion, according to Parsons, has traditionally supplied the main values of human societies, but an evolutionary process of 'value-generalization' has had the effect of reducing the supernatural component of the 'central value system' of most modern societies. The very success of Christianity, for example, in contributing towards the refinement of ethics and the motivation to diligent work attitudes has, paradoxically, driven the religion simultaneously towards greater abstractness or universality and greater personal inwardness to such a point that it has become a matter of generalized but private conscience. So, Christian values continue to feed into the life of modern America but not primarily through the direct agency of religious organizations and certainly not through state activity. Instead, the private religious convictions of individuals are credited by Parsons with preserving the Christian orientation of major social institutions. As I put it in *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*:

'The differentiation of religion from other social institutions, the principled separation of religion from law and politics, and the tolerance of religious diversity were not, then, treated by Parsons as evidence of secularization in any obvious sense of the term. The religious 'revival' of the mid-twentieth century in the USA confirmed Parsons in the belief that the case for secularization had been overstated, but he was well aware of the objections to his line of reasoning. Thus, he conceded that the growing popularity of organized religion in the 1950s might have been associated more with a search for sociability and psychological security than with theological beliefs, but he insisted that the central concern was allegedly still with values at a high level of abstraction. And he willingly acknowledged that modern religion *appeared* to have lost much of its former influence, but he attributed the losses to differentiation: not secularization. American society was regarded as a basically Christian society in which the character and expression of religion had admittedly changed in accordance with economic, political and social changes. But the prevailing values were still identified with ascetic Protestantism.

Consequently, the growing diversity of religion and the continuing presence of secularism were not considered to be incompatible with the persistence of the religious function. On the contrary, Parsons actually claimed that they were becoming progressively better integrated into a viable cultural system within American society. The structure of that society may have changed, but its basic values had not altered.

'This did not mean that religion had been eliminated from public life. Instead, Parsons argued that religion had been given 'a redefined place in the social scene' (Parsons 1960b: 298) as the culmination of a lengthy process of structural differentiation.

'Parsons's most general characterization of the re-orientated religion of the USA in the early-1970s was of 'a movement that resembles early Christianity in its emphasis on the theme of love' (Parsons 1974: 210-11). Modern religion is focused on life in the secular world, is relatively nontheistic and is coloured by a sense of alienation, according to Parsons. It is expressed in the search for spontaneous solidarity in experimental living patterns such as communes. It also represents a reaction against the rationalization and utilitarian individualism of industrial society but is not a repudiation of the basic American values of 'systematic rational work in "callings"'. Rather, the re-orientated religion was part of the shifting balance between the rational-cognitive and affective-expressive components of culture in favour of the latter. It amounts to the view that religious values of ever higher generality continue to guide societal development despite the declining power of religious organizations in public life. Religion's impact was said to be mainly at the level of personal identity, motivation and domestic morality. Parsons considered the 'privatization' of religion to be entirely appropriate to life in industrial societies but he denied that it was necessarily secularized in any obvious sense of the term.'

Critics of Parsons's interpretation of the persistence of American religion have accused him of sneaking in secularization under disguise. This is sometimes called 'internal secularization' since it refers to the loss of a genuinely supernaturalist inspiration within outwardly religious organizations and beliefs. The close association that Parsons claimed to detect between modern Christianity, economic motivation, private morality and political rectitude has been accused to taking the serious core out of religion and leaving behind the outer husk of conventional, middle class sociability. But Parsons consistently denied that secularization, in any obvious sense, had taken place in the US. He can be thought of therefore as a *reluctant* theorist of secularization.

3. Holes in the Sacred Canopy

Whereas Talcott Parsons approached the study of religion from the top down by asking questions about its functions for the whole social and cultural

system, a bottom-up approach is more characteristic of Peter Berger's work. His highly influential books (especially *The Sacred Canopy* of 1967, *The Rumour of Angels* of 1969 and *The Heretical Imperative* of 1980) are extended exercises in a kind of anthropological phenomenology. They start from intuitions about the human experience of fear in the face of nothingness or chaos. They induce a theory about the human need for meaning and order. A sacred cosmos is posited as the highest and most rewarding form of meaning, especially in its capacity to forge a theodicy.

If religion, in the sense of a concern with 'ultimate, universal and sacred reality' (1967, 36), is an anthropological necessity in Berger's view, how does secularization even become a possibility? Berger's response centres on the claim that a progressive break-up has occurred among formerly integrated constellations of meanings and social institutions. Whereas a single sacred cosmos, or at least a very small number of such cosmoi, used to act as the cultural cement of whole societies, modern societies have become too big, too diverse and too changeable to sustain unitary worldviews. Instead, pluralism and market competition have eroded the old certainties and fixities. There is no longer any guarantee that a single vision of the truth can remain plausible. What happens is that conversation among like-minded individuals can succeed in preserving *some* religious worldviews but, once the unitary vision has been lost, it becomes more difficult to defend any of their separate claims to truth. And the fact that individuals then have to choose their own worldview deals a further blow to *all* claims to religious truth. Secularization, pluralization and subjectivization are key features of the modern world in Berger's opinion. His outlook lacks the optimism of Parsons and it has exerted a powerful influence over many sociologists who prefer to think of secularization in terms of changes in religious consciousness. Thus,

...secularization frustrates deeply grounded human aspirations - most important among these, the aspiration to exist in a meaningful and ultimately hopeful cosmos... There are, of course, secular "theodicies", and they clearly work for some people. It appears, however, that they are much weaker than the religious "theodicies" in offering both meaning and consolation to individuals in pain, sorrow and doubt. (Berger 1977: 79)

Berger's account of secularization turns, then, on changes in subjective consciousness following in the wake of societal differentiation. It suggests that religion will only survive on the margins and in the interstices of mainstream society where cognitive minorities are able to preserve their 'precarious visions'.

4. Structural differentiation

The strongest case for secularization has been made by Bryan Wilson in numerous publications beginning in the 1960s. He has embellished his arguments over time, but the central themes have remained constant and coherent. Wilson has invariably insisted that his explanation of secularization

has its basis in observations of social structural changes at the level of modern societies and communities.

Secularization is associated with the structural differentiation of the social system - separation of different areas of social activity into more specialized forms... Instead of work activity, family, life, education, religious practice, the operation of law and custom and recreation, all being part of each other and affecting everyone in more or less self-sufficient close-knit small communities, as occurred in large measure in all pre-modern societies, we have highly specialized places, times, resources, and personnel involved in each of these areas of social life, and their efficiency and viability has depended on this process of specialization... (Wilson 1976: 40).

This implies that secularization is a highly inclusive process which turns on a shift in the distribution of power and resources between major social institutions.

In fact, Wilson's preoccupation with secularization is largely driven by the belief that the decline of community, by definition, implies the decline of religion. Thus,

... religion may be said to have its source in, and to draw its strength from, the community, the local, persisting relationships of the relatively stable group... [W]hereas religion once entered into the very texture of community life, in modern society it operates only in interstitial places in the system... One might, then, juxtapose the two phenomena: the religious community and the secular society (1982: 154-155).

He regards religion as 'the ideology of community' which has been marginalized by the integration of local communities into whole societies ('societalization'). There is allegedly no further need for religious ideology in increasingly rationalized societies in which integration and purpose are provided by the logic of rationality, function, system, and utility. Consequently, Wilson contends that,

Industrial society needs no local gods, or local saints; no local nostrums, remedies, or points of reference...

The large-scale societal system does not rely, or seeks not to rely, on a moral order, but rather, wherever possible, on technical order (1982: 159, 161).

In the few places where ideas of community persist, according to Wilson, they amount to nothing more than an out-dated, sentimental rhetoric. Recourse to this rhetoric is said to be necessary only because we have no other language in which loyalties and goodwill can be summoned and expressed. But he regards the rhetoric as empty because it can no longer tap the shared moral values on which the legitimacy of social order supposedly depends. This enables the societal system to rely 'less on people being good (according to the lights of the local community), and more on their being

calculable, according to the requirements of the developing rational order' (1982: 165).

Wilson acknowledges that religious activity is still lively in certain small groups, and this is consistent with his claim that secularization does not mean the demise of religion. He is, in fact, careful to apply the term 'secularization' only to the process whereby religion loses social significance, that is, it ceases to provide the major values, moral constraints, and legitimation in society.

In essence, [the formal model of secularization] relates to a process of transfer of property, power, activities, and both manifest and latent functions, from institutions with a supernaturalist frame of reference to (often new) institutions operating according to empirical, rational, pragmatic criteria. That process can be demonstrated as having occurred extensively, if unevenly, over a long historical period, and to have done so notwithstanding the spasmodic countervailing occurrence of resacralization in certain areas and instances of cultural revitalization exemplified in the emergence of charismatic leaders and prophets.

In particular the secularization model has been taken as referring to the shift in the location of decision making in human groups from elites claiming special access to supernatural ordinances to elites legitimating their authority by reference to other bases of power. (1985: 11-12)

This shift in the location of decision making allegedly has implications for the structure of rewards for work, personal conduct and education. Transmission of technical and theoretical knowledge assumes great importance:

The steady accumulation of empirical knowledge, the increasing application of logic, and the rational coordination of human purposes established an alternative vision and interpretation of life. Steadily, the good of man displaced what was once seen as the "will of providence" (or such other supernatural categories) and, in such areas as health, the dispositions of the supernatural were no longer regarded as adequate explanation for man's experience. Sanitation, diet, and experimental pharmacology displaced prayer, supplication, and resignation as the appropriate responses to disease and death. Man ceased to be solely at the disposition of the gods. (1985: 13)

The corollary is that life is guided less by superempirical, transcendent, other-worldly, revealed criteria and more by empirical, naturalistic, this-worldly, testable and planned criteria. The supernaturalist sanction no longer functions as the most effective way of controlling people. The result is that 'The system no longer functions, even notionally, to fulfill the will of God.' (1985: 19). Individuals may continue to act, think and feel in religious ways, but control over the social *system* has slipped away from religion.

Wilson's approach to secularization is on a much higher level of abstraction than Berger's. Wilson insists that secularization is a process of long-term

change at the level of whole societies. Berger locates secularization at the level of subjective consciousness.

Part 2: . . . and its discontents

The four variations on the theme of secularization is sufficiently varied to see that the theoretical grounds for thinking that religion is in decline, at least in advanced industrial societies, cannot be lightly dismissed. In addition, of course, assumptions about the decline of religion are also implicit in everyday life, journalism and fiction. This is a formidable body of arguments -- if not necessarily of good empirical evidence (Hadden 1987). But is it entirely convincing? I want to outline some relatively new reasons for being sceptical about secularization.

Before doing so, however, it should be mentioned that some arguments against secularization have been with us for a long time. They include such points as the following:

- a) Decline in formal religious organizations should not be equated with secularization.
- b) 'Real' religion can only flourish in the ruins of organized religion.
- c) It is misleading to assume that a Golden Age of intense and universal religiosity preceded the modern era.
- d) Most so-called theories of secularization are only thinly disguised ideological attacks on religion.

But let us now concentrate on two sets of relatively new arguments for at least suspending judgement about secularization, particularly in the USA. The first is Rational Choice Theory (RCT); the second is a disparate set of arguments for redefining the relationship between religion and modernity. We shall begin with an approach which is currently riding high in the US, and not only in the sociology of religion but also in economics and political science. This is RCT, as developed most intensively at the University of Chicago by Gary Becker and James Coleman. But the best known application of RCT to religion is the work of Rodney Stark and his various associates. The *locus classicus* is Stark and Bainbridge's *The Theory of Religion*, 1987.

5. Rational choice theory

According to Stark, human beings are cost-benefit accountants. They are continuously and normally involved in calculations of advantage. But the real novelty of Stark's approach lies in his belief that human beings are willing to define costs and benefits in terms other than strictly economic, material or tangible ones. In other words, the cost-benefit calculus is assumed to operate on the basis of 'compensators' or beliefs that rewards will be obtained in the remote future, although there can be no immediate verification. Compensators are moral IOUs which operate in all human activities and meaning systems along a continuum from specific to general. Some general compensatory

beliefs are so ambitious (for example peace on earth or life after death) that they can only make sense in the context of faith in supernatural forces or agencies. Thus, 'So long as humans intensely seek certain rewards of great magnitude that remain unavailable through direct actions, they will be able to obtain credible compensators only from sources predicated on the supernatural.' (Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 7-8) Put differently, 'Humans have a persistent desire for rewards only the gods can grant, unless humans become gods.' (Stark & Bainbridge 1987: 23) But 'When they know a cheaper or better way to gain rewards, people tend not to seek them from the gods.' (Stark & Bainbridge 1987: 85) Religions therefore amount to 'human organizations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions' (Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 8). This is a way of acknowledging that humans tend to 'maximize their behaviour', as the economists have it, in religion just as in every other sphere of life.

What can this rational choice perspective contribute towards the sociological understanding of religion? Is it able to raise interesting new questions about religion? Has it managed to explain things which were previously unexplained or poorly understood? Two major achievements call for comment here.

(a) Laurence Iannaccone's writings (1988, 1990, 1992), which explicitly apply an economic version of the rational choice model to religion, make far-reaching claims about the model's explanatory potential. For example, he has interpreted the declining rate of adherence to mainline 'liberal' churches in the US in terms of the 'free rider' principle: if the benefits of membership are slight and are shared by people who make very few contributions, there is very little incentive for others to invest time and resources in participation. By contrast, high-demand, exclusive religious groups offer distinctive rewards to those who are prepared to pay the costs of being stigmatized as outsiders or being required to follow an extremely restrictive lifestyle. The participants also have the satisfaction of knowing that no free-riders will be able to gain the rewards of adherence without paying the corresponding costs. As a result, Iannaccone argues that 'Potential members are forced to choose: participate fully or not at all. The seductive middle-ground is eliminated; average levels of commitment and participation increase; and, strange as it may seem, members come out ahead.' (1992: 127-28)

(b) To date, one of the most ambitious reasons for applying rational choice theory to religion has been to force a re-think of received wisdom about the dynamics of religious change in the US. The common belief that the significance of religion has declined in the modern world has not only received a serious challenge from advocates of the new perspective but has also been said to be empirically untrue for the US. The argument turns on the observation that, whereas fewer than twenty per cent of Americans belonged to Christian organizations in the eighteenth century, the proportion steadily increased throughout the following century and has stabilized in the twentieth century at around sixty per cent of the population. Analysis of church

adherence statistics indicates that, contrary to many sociological expectations, American churches have prospered more in urban than rural areas (Finke & Stark 1988); more in areas of religious diversity than in religiously homogeneous areas (when the proportion of Catholics is held constant) (Finke 1992); and more in conditions of deregulation than of regulation by state agencies (Finke 1990). The most comprehensive treatment of all these issues is Finke and Stark (1993).

This rapidly expanding body of economic and historical readings of American religious history therefore appears to call in question most of the general ideas about secularization which have shaped the sociology of religion this century. It suggests that the Revolutionary Era was definitely not a Golden Age of Faith in America but was, in fact, a low point above which rates of church adherence and rates of financial donations to churches went on increasing until they reached a plateau in the early twentieth century. Modernization, urbanization and industrialization were all *positively* correlated with the growing strength of churches, with the least liberal denominations (in theological and social terms) continuing to enjoy the highest rates of growth. Finke (1992: 164) is confident that 'The long forecasted decay of religion is not supported by the evidence' and that the freedom enjoyed by sectarian movements to compete, unhindered by state regulation, for adherents and other resources has greatly aided the growth of all religious organizations in the US.

The implication of RCT is that theories of secularization, most of which allegedly bear the indelible stamp of their European origins, tend (a) to miss the point about religion's universal significance, (b) underestimate the rational motivation for religious activity (Stark 1991), and (c) ignore the distinctiveness (if not uniqueness) of religion's trajectory in modern America. Applying rational choice theory to empirical evidence of long-term religious change therefore serves as a convenient way of launching an attack on the conventional idea of secularization as religious decline. Instead, Stark and Bainbridge (1987: 117) argue that secularization is 'a permanent process in every religious tradition. The result, however, is not the extinction of religion, but the weakening of some particular religious organizations. The counterbalancing processes of revival and innovation keep religion, in general, alive.' Rational choice theory does not so much abandon the idea of secularization as give it a very different, new meaning. It is also claimed that some of the other concepts already widely deployed in the sociology of religion (for example, church-sect theory) could be better understood and operationally refined if they were reformulated in rational choice terms.

An interesting advantage claimed for rational choice theory is that it generates findings which support a free-market message about the benefits to be derived from 'hands off' public policies towards religious organizations. The model allegedly shows that the lack of state regulation of religion in the US has created market conditions in which competition and diversity have enabled

'religious firms' to proliferate and to attract more adherents and resources than would be conceivable according to secularization theories. Moreover, the relative success of exclusive, high-demand religious groups in the latter half of the twentieth century can also be interpreted in terms of rational choice theory¹.

My overall assessment of the application of rational choice theories to the sociology of religion is that they have served a very useful function of debunking some received wisdom and of forcing a reconsideration of some well established concepts. They have also generated some unexpected and challenging empirical findings about the dynamics of church participation in the history of the US. There are grounds for expecting that the dynamics of religious organizations will be further clarified when they are subjected to analysis in the sort of terms that economists apply to profit-seeking firms. Yet, in the case of each of these achievements and promises, I believe that rational choice theory has not been able successfully to counter all the criticisms that have been levelled at it. It has effectively identified new questions to be asked, new angles on old topics and some perplexing, but preliminary, findings. And, in spite of misgivings about the logical status of rational choice postulates and its assumptions about the nature of rationality and individual human actors, it will certainly force sociologists to seek better explanations and interpretations of religion. This, in itself, is a considerable achievement.

6. Religion and Modernity

Some aspects of the old secularization debates are now resurfacing in the guise of disputes about the location of boundaries around the concept of religion. The question is no longer whether religion is necessarily in decline but, on the contrary, how far it is legitimate to extend the meaning of 'religion'. The terrain of debate has therefore shifted from issues involved in the conflict between religion and secularization to issues involved in the religious significance to be attributed to everyday phenomena in a version of modernity which is not by definition antithetical to religion. Two general strategies for re-framing the relationship between religion and modernity are interesting.

(a) One of the most original attempts to transcend the conventional secularization debates is Danièle Hervieu-Léger's (1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993a, 1993b) reinterpretation of the nature of modernity and, by implication, of religious change. Noting the diversity of meanings attributed to modernity in different countries and sociological traditions, she prefers to make a virtue

1. "Religions that abandon powerful, specific supernatural claims thereby lose their ability to serve many people's religious needs. More youthful and vigorous religions, that promise rewards and confidently explain the costs humans endure, will win converts at the expense of more fully evolved religious organizations." (Stark & Bainbridge 1987:117).

out of necessity by stressing the tensions, ambiguities and conflicts within the concept. In other words, the very problem of adequately conceptualizing modernity is not a sign of analytical weakness for her but, rather, a clue to one of modernity's main features, namely, the simultaneous operation of forces at odds with each other. For example, the growing diversity of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies may be simultaneously an indication of a formal religious pluralism and a reminder that in reality the distribution of power, prestige and moral significance among religious groups in many modern societies still reflects older patterns of privilege and prejudice which militate against pluralism. Similarly, the frequently remarked process whereby social institutions, including religion, have become progressively differentiated from each other in modern societies is nevertheless shadowed by the less frequently remarked processes of standardization and centralization. On the level of individuals, an analogous tension can be observed between the tendency towards the atomization of individual identity and the tendency for religionists to draw together in small groups or associations. In all these respects, then, modernity is considered less as a settled condition and more as a configuration of shifting and contradictory tendencies. The dominant features of modernity, according to Hervieu-Léger, are ambiguity and open-endedness. This depiction is far removed from the confident predictions about the triumph of science over faith, and of reason over religion, which characterized most of the models of modernity in which secularization loomed large.

The main implication of Hervieu-Léger's distinctive conceptualization of modernity for the sociology of religion is to challenge many of the received ideas about the eclipse of faith by reason. For example, her analysis acknowledges the force of instrumental rationalization in all spheres of modern life but it also draws attention to the other side of the coin, namely, the production of irrationalities and dissatisfactions in the wake of rationalization. Each advance of rationalization is said to incur a moral or metaphysical cost which has to be paid in the currency of religion. Modernity does not therefore involve the eclipse of religion. Instead, the rapid pace of social and cultural change in modernity constantly creates new problems, new ambiguities and new tensions to which only equally flexible and shifting forms of religion are an appropriate response. Thus, modernity as such can produce its own religious universe because the opposition between the limited world of the present, with its contradictions, and the unlimited world of the future ... creates its own space for belief at the very heart of modernity (Hervieu-Léger 1990: 22, 23). Modernity destroys religion as a system of fixed meanings and values but it also fuels religion as a mode of responding to ambiguities and contradictions. Hervieu-Léger therefore presents the relationships between religion and modernity as intensely dialectical and open-ended. Rationalization goes hand-in-hand with the constant adjustment of religion to the shifting gaps between the utopian hope for progress and the persistent opacity of the modern world.

For reasons which are definitely not the same as Rodney Stark's, Danièle Hervieu-Léger has reinterpreted the meaning of secularization. Far from using it in the sense of the decline of religion, she understands it as a process whereby the work of religion is constantly being reorganized to cope with the failure of the high expectations associated with, for example, rapid scientific and technical progress. If modernity is a rapidly receding horizon, religion acts as an imaginative force for filling the gap between reality and utopia. The fact that rates of adherence to religious groups may collapse and that the public authority of religious organizations may dissolve is virtually irrelevant to the argument. The work of religion can presumably take place in symbols, values and motivations relatively independently from formal religious institutions.

(b) The second possibility is to conceptualize religion, the sacred and the transcendent in such all-inclusive terms that the decline of religion is virtually defined away. Contrary to Stark and Bainbridge's insistence that religious compensators referred to the supernatural and to Hervieu-Léger's (1989, 1993b) hypothesis that religious beliefs are characterized by their appeal to a tradition², a third possibility is to treat as religious whatever human beings regard as having ultimate significance for them. This implies that the changing fortunes of religious organizations can be analytically separated to some extent from the patterns of individual beliefs.

Thomas Luckmann's (1963, 1967) early statements of this position remain among the most radical insofar as they associate religious awareness with the very process of socialization. A more recent formulation of his views opens up the possibility of applying Luckmann's approach to the analysis of how religion operates in everyday life. Starting from the postulate that in human life the supernatural is bound up with the natural; ultimate meanings of life make sense only in the context of the significance of common everyday affairs (Luckmann 1990: 128), he goes on to analyze the various ways in which life is experienced as a continuous flow of transcendence. Everyday experiences which trigger little transcendent experiences are qualitatively different from less common experiences which trigger intermediate transcendences. Only rare and unusual experiences trigger the kind of great transcendences which are associated with, for example, impressive liturgies or major mystical moments. Luckmann's argument is that intermediate and great transcendences have become less frequent and familiar as social differentiation has increasingly separated religion from other social institutions. Nowadays, in his view, individuals construct their own private assortment of religious themes which may nevertheless inform their everyday life by means of little

2. '[T]he religious belief of modern societies refers neither to objects of particular belief, nor to specific social practices, nor even to original representations of the world, but is characterized by a particular mode of legitimation of the belief act, that is *the appeal to a tradition* (Hervieu-Léger, 1989: 77. Emphasis original).

transcendences. Thus, the scope of transcendence has shrunk in the modern world, but the range of experiences which may trigger this modest amount of transcendence has grown wider. Religion no longer functions, then, as an overarching or obligatory meaning system but has been decanted or relocated into the personalized assortments of symbols and values that individuals construct largely for themselves or in interaction with small groups of close kin or friends. In this sense, religion expands into more and more areas of everyday life, while the depth of transcendence shrinks. Hence, the title of Luckmann's article 'Shrinking transcendence, expanding religion?'

Other sociologists have recently produced interpretations of religious changes which are consistent to varying degrees with his general position. For example, Edward Bailey (1989; 1990a; 1990b) has documented the continuing vitality of *implicit* religion in numerous spheres of life. Implicit religion themes include 'intense concern with extensive effect', 'integrating foci of life', 'personal depth' and 'commitment'. Each of them implies that religion is still 'a power to be reckoned with, publicly and privately' (Bailey 1990a: 486) and that modern secularity still contains sacreds within itself.

Luckmann's perspective is also mirrored, and modified, in Roberto Cipriani's (1989: 28) concern with the importance of *diffuse* religion particularly in countries where the Catholic culture has been dominant in the recent past. Thus:

"Diffused religion" refers to the characteristic conduct of believers who have received at least a Catholic education and who relate to it in a general sense. In fact, it refers to citizens who appear to be less than completely obedient to the directives of the Catholic hierarchy but who, on the other hand, refuse to reject completely certain basic principles which form part of the set of values promoted by Catholicism.

The applicability of Cipriani's notion of diffuse religion to Catholicism in the UK might be questioned, however, by Michael Hornsby-Smith and his associates (1985: 247) who prefer to use the concept of customary religion to capture 'those beliefs and practices which are derived from official religion but which are not subject to continued control by the churches'. But leaving aside the fundamental differences between countries in which Catholicism was dominant or subordinate, there is a strong measure of agreement between Cipriani and Hornsby-Smith that Catholics increasingly pick-and-mix in a privatized fashion from among the available repertoires of symbolic resources. It is a free choice - within the broad limits imposed by the dwindling legacy of a formerly authoritative Catholic tradition.

Grace Davie's (1990a, 1990b) claims that a gap is currently widening in Britain between the willingness to profess religious beliefs and the strength of belonging to religious organizations may actually be more compatible with Luckmann's thesis. Her argument is that certain religious beliefs appear to remain widely distributed across the population (with, of course, variations over time and by age, sex, social class, ethnicity and region) but that

membership and participation in the activities of religious organizations are at a relatively lower level and are declining faster. The growing discrepancies between rates of religious believing and belonging may therefore be confirmation of Luckmann's argument about privatization, but I think that Davie's analysis is less radical because it uses a more restrictive definition of religion, and is really focused on the extent to which conventional patterns of religious believing and belonging are surviving and changing rather than on the emergence of entirely new styles of privatized or invisible religion. Indeed, Hornsby-Smith (1992: 133) denies that most English Catholics conform with Davie's model. They are more likely, in his opinion, to adhere to 'core' but not 'creedal' beliefs and 'to make up their own minds on a growing range of issues' without necessary reference to the Church.

Champion and Hervieu-Léger's (1990) account of the development in France since the 1970s of highly subjectivized and emotional styles of religiosity raises yet another possibility, namely, that patterns of both belief *and* belonging have been disrupted by a return to pure, original sources of religion. For, at a time when modernizing movements such as Catholic Action were going into decline in the 1970s, charismatic renewal was taking off in French Catholic churches. Meanwhile, the more emotionally intense forms of Protestant evangelicalism were also becoming popular while churches which were more closely associated with the modern world were stagnating. Indeed, there was evidence of exultant religious experience among individuals and of demonstrative transports of joy on the collective level.

The guiding question for many of these French studies is whether the proliferation of voluntary, emotional groups with a focus on personal identity implies the end of religion in the sense of an abandonment of reference to an authoritative tradition. Hervieu-Léger (1990) takes the opposite view, namely, that there have been long-term cycles of emotional revitalization and institutional routinization throughout history. Recent emotional upheavals in French Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism may therefore represent the latest counter-secularizing current which is nevertheless critical of institutionalized religion, and, in particular, of its acclimatization to modern society. Paradoxically, some of these upheavals involve a return to religious *tradition*, albeit constituted in terms of unmistakably modern forms of *subjectivity*. This illustrates Hervieu-Léger's (1993b) more general point that religious institutions are nowadays torn between the need to assert their specific identities in terms of authoritative traditions and, at the same time, the need to encourage their members to foster emotionally satisfying individual identities as autonomous, modern subjects with the freedom to chose their own beliefs and values. This is how religious organizations respond to the paradoxical and ambiguous character of modernity. Secularization is not, therefore, the issue.

Part 3: Conclusions

We can summarize the three main points quite succinctly. First, ideas about secularization which tended to dominate at least English-language sociology of religion between the 1950s and the 1970s have run into concerted criticism and opposition in the last few years. Second, the critical response is based partly on perceived limitations in the way in which secularization theorists conceptualized religion and partly on evidence about new expressions of religion. And third, there is a strong likelihood that the new approaches will result in research which makes better connections between religion and other social phenomena than was common when the focus was on secularization.

Let us expand on this third point by asking 'What are likely to be the main benefits of the new approach which brackets questions of secularization?'

a) Once the habit of making religious decline the focal point of research is abandoned, it becomes much easier to take proper account of *new* religious developments. To put this differently, the growth of new religious groupings and interests warrants examination in its own right -- not simply as a footnote or an exception to a presumed pattern of overall decline. This is not to deny, of course, that many ancient and mainstream religious organizations are in serious decline. They certainly are. Rather, my point is to refuse to allow this fact to blind us to the reality of other developments. It's a matter of how we choose to frame our perceptions. As in those infuriating visual experiments, whether we perceive a duck's or a rabbit's head in the picture depends on what we think the context or frame really is. When we change the frame, the perceived meaning changes.

b) The history of religion in many parts of the world tells us a lot about the ease with which religion *can* be allied with political power, cultural authority and high social status. Indeed, some religious organizations and groupings have become so powerful that they have successfully persecuted or exploited others, or at least connived at persecution. This is a *Leitmotif* of European history, for example. But the challenges to secularization theories implicitly caution us against thinking that religion is only really religious when it exercises or mediates power over large sections of society. The fact that many new manifestations of spirituality and religion play no obvious part in cementing a whole society together or in providing a sacred canopy for an entire social system does not necessarily exclude them from the category of things religious. The founding and formative generations of sociologists, who tended to base their model of all religion on the case of thirteenth century Christianity in Europe, may have mistaken historical accidents for categorical necessity.

c) If the definitional constraints are lifted, one of the challenges then becomes to find ways of studying religion in forms and manifestations which are more elusive than are churches, creeds or worship services. Indeed, a major task is to listen carefully and unobtrusively to the way in which people talk about all manner of things in order to detect any signs of sacred significance. What

now counts as ultimately important to them? In what situations do people recognize ultimate reality? This can be extended to ways of studying the uses to which conventional or new religious symbolism and language are put in everyday life. But this can only be done in good faith if prior assumptions about the necessarily superior or more genuine quality of the religion practised in formal religious organizations.

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