71st Conway Memorial Lecture

THE SECULARIZATION QUESTION:
Is Religion Losing Its Social Significance?

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Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION - PROFESSOR GERALD VINTEN

It could not be a greater pleasure for me to have the honour of introducing Dr Bryan Wilson as the 1996 presenter of the 71st Conway Memorial Lecture. We have not met since I was a postgraduate student at Balliol College, Oxford some 24 years ago when Bryan occupied the senior sociology position in the University at the most prestigious of colleges, All Souls - a name scarcely secular!

I first came across Bryan in an anonymous form. At an interview for a place at Sussex University, when I mentioned field work I had carried out during the VIth form into sectarian movements, I was told that someone who had since become a famous sociologist had established his reputation in this area and perhaps I would do the same! It was only after I arrived at Leeds University that I discovered Bryan’s identity and pioneering book which was in the Library of Sadler Hall, donated by Bryan himself since he had been a past Warden of the Hall. We first met after a formal dinner at the Hall at which Bryan was guest of honour. We kept in touch and when I went to Oxford I attended his seminars on sociology of religion. I can only apologise for not enrolling on his BPhil in Sociology and deserting the nest in favour of my present chair in business policy.

However, religions regarded as businesses, remain an area of study and research: I warned a PhD student off when he received threats in attempting to research the financial aspects of American radio evangelism. A year ago while being conducted around temples in Shanghai by my friend, the Deputy Auditor General of China, I commented on the huge amount of money they were capable of raising, particularly through pasting up prayer cards for the dead; the privileged lifestyle of the monks included a veritable array of satellite dishes! Bryan alludes in his lecture to the monetary criterion underlying the secularization thesis.

It is nostalgic to be able to revisit the secularization debate. That debate is central to any consideration of the role of religion in contemporary society. I share the disdain of the cultural imperialism which concentrates on Christianity and generally the Protestant (as in the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism) and Catholic varieties but rarely the Orthodox tradition. Economically the future of the world is likely to be in countries in which Christianity is only a minority pursuit. Far too little is written or researched on the Confucianist ethic (all wok and no play!). Bryan remains one of the main formulators and commentators on the secularization issue and we look forward with great anticipation to the contribution he makes here to the progress of the debate.
THE SECULARIZATION QUESTION:

Is Religion Losing Its Social Significance?

BRYAN WILSON

The idea that advanced, developed societies were destined to be, or to become, essentially secular societies is one that has been in circulation for a long time; certainly since the epoch of the Enlightenment. The early expression of this theme combined elements of both prediction and advocacy - a combination which later thinkers were to disavow. The nineteenth century sociologists who took up this proposition - whatever may have been their private predilections - gradually shifted the weight of their concern more to the predictive aspect of the phenomenon. For the founder of sociology, Auguste Comte, and perhaps also for Karl Marx, there was ultimately no need for advocacy: the secular destiny of society was already pre-determined. The course of social evolution would eliminate the need for recourse to supernaturalistic theories to account for the human condition. Comte, for whom the issue was the central concern of his positivist philosophy, saw the course of development well marked out in three stages: from a theological, through a metaphysical, to a positive stage of social development; he ascribed to himself the role of establishing for the study of social reality, a detached, objective, and value-free approach similar to that which he believed had gradually developed in the natural sciences.¹

Comte’s passion for this "positive philosophy" eventually led to his squaring of the circle. Despite his intellectual commitment to objectivity and ethical neutrality, he was in a quite unscientific way, emotionally committed to it and, in his later years, this led him to promote his positivism virtually as a religion. Ignoring Comte’s latter-day aberrations, his sociological successors came to recognise the need to distinguish between advocacy and prediction. With respect to secularity, it is an important distinction the difference between secularism and secularization. The literature on the subject, much of it theologically inspired, mindlessly confuses the two, the terms often being used interchangeably. A moment's thought will make clear, however, that there is a distinct difference in meaning and purpose between these words. Secularism is a specific commitment, sometimes an ideology, which seeks to promote secular interpretations of phenomena and which marshals arguments, sometimes actions, to extrude from all
areas of social explanation, instruction, and activity any recourse to ideas of the supernatural.

Secularization, in contrast, purports to be a detached and neutral designation for a process occurring in the organization of society, in the culture, and in the collective mentalité. Obviously, there may be a relationship in certain contexts between secularism and secularization: advocacy may stimulate or at least interact with actual social trends. But quite independent of explicit advocacy, many sociologists have contended that, in one form or another, a process of secularization occurs as part of the evolution of advancing, modernizing societies.²

It is with this apparently endemic trend in social organization, that the secularization thesis is primarily concerned. The thesis contends that, in advanced societies, there is a general decline in the significance of religion in the operation of the social system: that, to a greater or lesser degree, religious institutions, practices, and beliefs lose their erstwhile salience in all areas of social life. The process is regarded as being implicit in the changing locus of authority in society, in the changing character of knowledge and in the increased demand that those engaged in the work roles of the social system should act and be motivated according to rational principles.

Thus, with respect to authority, the long-term shift is from the arbitrary power acquired by conquering strata and transmitted to their aristocratic descendants, that is from those rated as "noble" by virtue of their ancestors' prowess in battle, to authority wielded by those who are technically qualified and/or democratically endorsed. With regard to changes in knowledge, empirical enquiry and scientific procedures supersede earlier unsubstantiated theories and explanations. In the case of work roles, as labour becomes more specialised and increasingly regulated according to the demands of the machines and equipment with which it is increasingly invested, while equipment grows increasingly technological, so it imposes rational behaviour on those who use it or are affected by it. Not only in the sphere of work is this the case, but it becomes the everyday experience in contending with all kinds of technological innovations - from motor cars and traffic lights to credit cards and data retrieval systems.

The secularization thesis does not, of course, contend that the process is everywhere similar in its expression, or that it is uniformly even, either over time or as among various departments of social life. It is not even suggested that there
may not at times be a reactive assertion of renewed religious sentiments. But the thesis does postulate that, over the longer run, recourse to the supernatural diminishes as a matter of public policy, in social relations and as a legitimation for social action and even for personal behaviour. Clearly, the process must vary in its form and pace according to the cultural and religious traditions of each given society, and perhaps as between different social institutions. Thus the evidence for secularization is likely to be different as between, say, the United States and Britain; as between western nations and Japan, or as between countries with a predominantly Catholic tradition, such as France, Belgium, Italy and those that underwent the Reformation; and different in the degree of persistence of religious influence in, say, the polity, the economy, the judicature, and schooling. Different as the incidence of decline in the social significance of religion may be in these various instances, the thesis postulates that secularization is a phenomenon concomitant with modernization.

In particular, it is pointed out that modern societies have undergone what sociologists call structural differentiation. The various major social institutions, such as those I have just mentioned - the polity; the economy; the system of justice; education; to which may perhaps be added the military; social policy; health; and recreation - have acquired increasing autonomy, both from one another and, most particularly, from that other institution - religion. Religion was once a dominant influence in all these other areas of the social system. Think, for example, of the dependence of monarchs on the church for their counsellors; of the extent to which princes of the church were inter-related with the aristocratic rulers of the state, or were themselves, in such personages as Richelieu and Wolsey, or even Talleyrand, society’s statesmen. Or consider economic activities in medieaval societies, when the church regulated the work of the agricultural seasons and within the guild system laid down the rules governing competition, production and sales, as well as enforcing the laws against usury. Or again, take social control: religion, with its threats of hell (or at least of purgatory) and blandishments of heaven, provided a system of post-mortem rewards and punishments, establishing itself as a conscious agency reinforcing the law.

In education, the influence lasted longer, of course and although expunged in the United States, lingers on in Britain in the legal commitment of schools to undertake corporate acts of worship - albeit, a commitment that is today widely breached. Also, although, as a social institution, the family functions locally rather than societally, even in the realm of familial affairs, secularizing processes
can be observed; for instance in reinterpreting what were once designated "the little gifts of God" to be rather the results of well-planned pregnancies.

The secularization thesis has not, however, gone unchallenged. Critics have laid the charge that it is itself a dogma - that, ironically, sociologists have been guilty of sacralizing the secularization thesis, of creating it as a sacred cow of the discipline; indeed, of producing a new kind of myth.³

In support of these assertions they have pointed to a variety of evidence. First, they contend that if secularization is an on-going process, this implies that once there was a pre-secular age, an age of faith from which modern society has receded. When, they ask, was that age of faith?⁴ They point, justifiably enough, to the regular complaints in the reports of episcopal visitations throughout Europe, that considerable proportions of the population failed to take regular communion; that many villagers, as well as townsfolk, lived immoral lives; that some were disposed to practise pagan rituals, or to consult soothsayers and "wise women" who operated in competition with the Church.⁵

Secondly, they point, particularly in the case of the United States, to the steady increase of actual church membership over the course of many decades and to claims of increased church attendance in a country where, today, it is often alleged that something like forty-five per cent of the population attend church on any given ordinary Sunday. Is this not, they argue, a direct contradiction of the secularization thesis? on this evidence, people are assessed as being more religious in this, the most modern of societies than they had ever been since the establishment of America as the first new nation-state.⁶

Third, they remark on the emergence in the last four or five decades of many New Religious Movements.⁷ Those movements have attracted sections particularly of the young, drawing them into systems of belief and religious practice of a particularly intense kind. Others, in promising their votaries the enhancement of their capacities and the realization of their human potential, as well as the happiness and satisfaction that will result from such personal empowerment, have recruited widely among a somewhat older population. Some of these movements, they note, are committed to a variant of positive thinking and have also won the trust of some business corporations which have paid for their employees to attend seminars and courses to acquire these religiously inspired attitudes of mind and to deploy them in their work roles. These movements, some of which have become household names, have made a world-wide impact with adherents in the Orient as
well as in the Western world, also in former Communist countries.

Fourth, they point to what is represented as the world-wide resurgence of fundamentalism within various religious traditions - Christianity, especially in the United States, and, turning to less modern states, Judaism in Israel; Islam, in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries; and Hinduism in contemporary, officially secular, India. Fundamentalism is depicted as in itself a counter movement to modernism, and a re-assertion of deeply-laid religious beliefs and sentiments, drawn forth in circumstances of crisis.

Fifth, as evidence of the persisting vigour of religious belief and of the power of religion even in the modern world, allusion is made to the role of the Christian churches in resistance to the Communist polities of Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and what was East Germany, including the part which Christians played in the collapse of the communist state systems in the old East bloc. In furtherance of the same general point, critics of the secularization thesis also note that it is reported that, in former Soviet Russia, the churches, the operation of which not so long ago was so strongly interdicted by the State, are now experiencing the voluntary return of many people, even receiving subsidies and concessions from the government itself.

Finally, critics affirm that religious bodies are today reclaiming a public role and are resisting, rather than accepting, their relegation to the private sphere. In concentrating attention on the agencies of the state and the major public institutions, the secularization thesis suggested that the principal context in which religious expression has persisted has been in the private dispositions of individuals. In the situation in which religious pluralism prevails and in which there is either no public endorsement or a much diminished public endorsement of religion, the opportunity exists for individuals to adopt the "religion of their choice" as Americans quaintly put it. Thus, when some 80 per cent of Americans respond to a sociological survey by declaring that the individual has the right to form his/her own religious beliefs independently of the teachings of any church or synagogue, this is affirming most emphatically that religion is a private matter.

The privatization of religion has been regarded by many as an associated development of secularization. The critics of the secularization thesis, however, contend that religion is already acquiring a new public role. Since it is no longer involved as a legitimating agency for the state, or as a bulwark for other social institutions, religion in the modern world is liberated to assume the role of social
critic, challenging public policy and even political arrangements. They point to the emergence of religious lobbies - particularly in the United States and it is in the United States that this argument is chiefly made - campaigning, for example, against abortion; or euthanasia; or for the rights of asylum for refugees. Thus, they argue that, although its role has changed, religion remains influential and significant in modern society - in flat contradiction of what is pre-supposed by the secularization thesis.

How substantial are these objections to the broad contentions of the secularization thesis? Superficially, it appears self-evident that, if religion has declined, then there must have been an earlier time when religion was more vigorous. Yet, at second glance it may be noted that those who pursue this argument slip easily into supposing that religion means Christianity and only Christianity. The secularization thesis is not narrowly bound in this way: religion takes many forms and there is little doubt that, allowing for soothsayers, witchcraft, divination, astrology and magic in all its varied forms, society in the past was abundantly more disposed to invoke the supernatural than is the case today.

Resort to the supernatural for explanations and for succour may not always, or even mainly, have been channelled through Christian agencies, but that it was widespread and commonplace in both tribal and mediaeval societies, is widely acknowledged. Paradoxically, this very acknowledgement is advanced as evidence for the absence of an age of faith, when that age is conceived in narrowly Christian terms. Once one transcends the exclusivist assumption that in referring to religion one necessarily confines oneself to Christianity, the contention that "there never was an age of faith" collapses.

Many of those who discuss secularization appear to suppose that the crucial test of the thesis lies in the statistics of church attendance. That this again narrows the ground to conventional Christianity is at once apparent - a narrowing which, in fact, might be said to cripple both sides of the argument. Exclusive concern with church attendance, church membership and such rites of passage as baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals, tells only a fraction of the story.

Secularization is concerned not simply with patterns of social behaviour, but with the principles and assumptions by which society is organized and by which it operates. Declining numbers in church may be an attendant phenomenon of the secularization process, but it is by no means the core substance of that process;
and whilst in Britain and generally in Europe, church attendance and the use of church facilities for rites of passage have been generally declining, it is by no means inconceivable that attendance figures could remain static, or even increase, in societies the organization and operation of which were simultaneously manifesting increasingly secularized characteristics.\textsuperscript{12}

What must also be recognized is that "going to church" is not a unitary cultural phenomenon and that statistics concerning this item of behaviour conceal the diverse cultural implications that may attend it. Since this is so, comparative analysis of church attendance or membership figures between societies or even within one given society at different historical periods, must be regarded as suspect. The history of a given nation; the availability of other symbolic actions to express, for example, national allegiance, or community identity; and the social functions of church-going within particular local communities, are all variables which are distinct from the appraisal of actual piety and which affect attendance figures. In America, it has long been acknowledged that the church may occupy a symbolic role in the local community and that religious commitment to any of the major denominations may, as a sociologist forty years ago opined, be a way of expressing American identity.\textsuperscript{13}

In Britain, it has been alleged that many people believe without belonging to a church community, but it appears that there are also those who belong without believing, or at least without believing very much. Again, when we consider denominational differences, the comparability of church attendance statistics is rendered dubious when we take into account that "going to church" means something quite different for a Catholic from the meaning which this item of behaviour has for a Baptist, a Unitarian, a Quaker or a Christian Scientist.

The critics of the secularization thesis attach considerable importance to the emergence in the western world since the Second World War of a variety of new and widely diverse, religious movements.\textsuperscript{14} Some of these, such as The Family (formerly known as the Children of God), the Jesus Army and the Unification Church are variants of the Christian tradition. Others, such as Transcendental Meditation, the Hare Krishna Movement, Soka Gakkai and the Western Buddhist Order, are movements deriving from one or another oriental religious tradition. A further strand, the congeries of groups loosely labelled as "New Age" movements, are eclectic in their teachings, but draw heavily on magical and occultist sources.
Finally, but by no means exhaustively, there are the so-called "human potential" movements which proclaim their mission as being the enhanced empowerment of those who subscribe to their programmes: they include the Church of Scientology, the Forums Network, Silva Mind Control, Synanon, and Exegesis. Certainly, taken altogether, and diverse as they are in style and structure, they represent a by no means insignificant phenomenon.

From the dozen or so movements that I have named it is apparent that new religions are a fact to be reckoned with. They are estimated to number perhaps more than three or four hundred in Britain, and in France, the government officially lists over a hundred and seventy.\textsuperscript{15} The question is whether this outcropping of these new expressions of spirituality represents a reversal of the process of secularization, or at least a brake on its progress.

First, it should be recognized that, despite the widespread media attention which, from time to time, some of these movements have received, many of them and particularly those committed to a communitarian pattern of organization, are in fact rather small. Thus, the Moonies and The Family each account for at most a few hundred people in Britain with only a few thousands in the western world as a whole. In another case, that of the Society for Krishna Consciousness, the recruitment of members of the indigenous population has been limited in western countries, but the movement has become acknowledged by many immigrants from the sub-continent as something specifically Indian; quite contrary to expectations and initial intentions, indeed, it has become an overseas mission for Indians living in the West. As such it represents not only a version of Hinduism but a repository of specifically Indian culture.

The communitarian groups, then, are small, but they clearly demand total commitment from their devotees - a factor which in itself has induced media attention. In contrast, many of the non-communitarian organizations maintain only a segmentary hold on their adherents: belonging to the movement becomes one among a number of social involvements or obligations. Thus, most of the human potential movements and some teaching yoga and meditation (including Transcendental Meditation), do not seek to control all the life-time involvements of all those who sign up. For most recruits they offer a limited course of training, after which the member may practise the therapeutic or meditative techniques he has learned in private: many, despite organizational pressure to take more