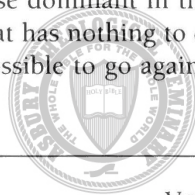# CHRISTIANITY AND SECULARISM

WOLFHART PANNENBERG

I

In the course of this century the cultural context of Christian churches changed significantly. The culture became more visibly non-religious than it had been before. Certainly, the separation between church and state originated two centuries earlier. But that did not necessarily entail an alienation of the culture from its religious roots. With the exception of Judaism, most of the different churches that came to enjoy unrestricted activities after the abolishment of an established religion, were Christian denominations so that the predominately Christian, even Protestant character of the American culture was not deeply changed as an immediate consequence of the separation between church and state. In other Western societies more explicit links with some or another Christian church continued to be effective until the present century. Nevertheless, it will become evident that the roots of the process of secularization that resulted in the present alienation of the public culture from religion and especially from Christianity, can be traced back to the seventeenth century.

In the contemporary situation, the climate of secularism puts considerable strain on the confidence of believers in the truth of the Christian teaching. It is the situation Peter L. Berger described years ago in his book *A Rumor of Angels* (1969), in terms of the situation of a cognitive minority whose standards of knowledge deviate from those that are publicly taken for granted. Plausibility, Berger wrote, "in the sense of what people actually find credible, of views of reality depends upon the social support these receive." Where this social plausibility weakens, it requires additional personal strength to maintain beliefs that are no longer in line with those dominant in the social context. This is a social and psychological situation that has nothing to do with the question of truth. "It is, of course," says Berger, "possible to go against the social consensus that sur-

rounds us, but there are powerful pressures [which manifest themselves as psychological pressures within our own consciousness] to conform to the views and beliefs of our fellow men"(43). This is precisely the strain which the secularist culture puts on the consciousness and behavior of Christians in Western societies that were formerly more or less strongly influenced by Christian values and beliefs.

One consequence of the secularist mood is that the extent of sheer knowledge about Christian teachings, biblical names and events, and the history of Christianity is dwindling. The situation is no longer that some people reject the truth claims of Christian teachings. Increasing numbers of them don't even know about what should be accepted or rejected. This is remarkable because Christianity has been so important in our cultural tradition. One cannot understand Western culture and its history without the Christian religion. The more widespread the lack of information about the contents of the Bible and Christian teachings, however, the easier the creeping up of prejudices against Christianity, especially the prejudice that Christianity has been an oppressive form of religion. Therefore, even when people are getting interested in religion again, which is a natural reaction against the lack of deeper meaning in the secularist culture, they would not normally turn to Christianity, but rather to alternative forms of religion.

The difficulties of the Christian message in this cultural situation have been sharpened recently by tendencies to relativize the concern for truth. While the enlightenment challenged the traditional Christian affirmations by demanding rational argument for the truth claims of Christian teaching instead of a simple appeal to authority, now truth claims as such are considered obsolete. This turns Christian doctrines into mere opinions that may be affirmed or not according to individual options and preference. The dissolution of the notion of truth, however, ruins the idea of Christian missions. Missionary preaching is no longer seen as bringing the truth to other people—and therefore legitimate—but as imposing upon them one's personal opinions, which must appear improper. And even when we leave the issue of missions aside, why should people opt for the Christian faith, if not because the apostolic teaching is true? Or, more precisely, if it is not even meaningful to claim its content to be true? The issue of truth is absolutely vital for the Christian faith. The destruction of the idea of truth, on the other hand, can be seen as a strategy of legitimating the secularist culture since its lack of true meaning is precisely the point of its most delicate vulnerability.

II

Secularism and even modern culture in general have sometimes been characterized as a phenomenon of apostasy from the Christian faith. The most important Christian thinker who took that view was Karl Barth. In Karl Barth's opinion, modern culture has been a revolt against the Christian faith in putting the human being in the place of God. There is much that can be said in favor of such an interpretation of modern culture. The concept of human nature has indeed become basic in modern culture in a way that can be compared to the religious foundation of the cultural system in earlier periods of history. The concern for human rights is but one aspect, though politically the most important aspect of the occupation of modern culture with human
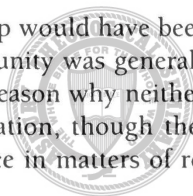
nature and whatever belongs to it. Increasingly that meant to make the human individual the highest value and criterion. But does that modern tendency possess no truth whatsoever in a Christian view? Should it simply be rejected as modern apostasy? Is not the emphasis on the individual person of distinctively Christian origin? Does not Christianity have a great deal in common with that modern spirit? Did it not even contribute to liberate the Christian consciousness itself from the distortion of intolerance? The relationship between the Christian faith and modernity seems more ambivalent than to allow for a simple rejection of modernity by Christians. Though modern culture, in turning secularist, contributed to the alienation of a great many people from the Christian faith, it is still necessary for Christians to learn and remember the lesson that the rise of modernity teaches and to appropriate its positive values to the Christian consciousness itself.

<center>III</center>

The distinction between the secular and the religious or spiritual realm had a long history in the development of Christianity. In earlier centuries that distinction did not imply the complete separation and emancipation of the secular segments of social life—the political and economic system, but also law and parts of the educational system and arts—from the spiritual life of the church. To the contrary, the distinction between the secular and the religious sphere had itself a Christian basis. The Christian awareness that the present order of society is not yet the kingdom of God, but an imperfect and provisional form of social life, lies at the root of the distinction between the secular and the spiritual. It is a distinction that sets Christianity apart from other religiously imbued cultures like Islam. It separated the Byzantinian Empire already from the pre-Christian Roman empire, because in the post-Constantinian period there was a balance between the authority of the bishops and that of the emperor, while in Ancient Rome the emperor himself had been the highest priest, *pontifex maximus*.

The distinction between the religious and the secular, however, took on another significance after the Reformation of the sixteenth century or, more precisely, after the century of religious wars that followed in the wake of the breakup of the medieval church which had been the unwanted result of the Reformation. When in a number of European countries no religious party could get the upper hand in the attempt of imposing its own faith upon the entire society, the unity of the social system had to be based on a foundation other than religion, since religion had proved to disrupt the social peace. In the second half of the seventeenth century, therefore, most people became convinced that religious controversies had to be bracketed if social peace was to be restored. This was the historical movement when modern secular culture was born.

In earlier centuries, such a step would have been unimaginable. Even in the century of the Reformation, religious unity was generally considered indispensable for the unity of a society. This was the reason why neither Luther nor Calvin could conceive the possibility of religious toleration, though they emphasized the decisive importance of the individual conscience in matters of religious faith. The step toward reli-

gious freedom and toleration was first taken in the Netherlands, near the end of the sixteenth century, in order to restore peace between the Catholic and Protestant parts of the population of that country. The principle of religious freedom and toleration was proclaimed by William of Orange with the confidence of acting in line with the Protestant understanding of the Christian faith, in line with the liberty of a Christian, which Luther had thought and with the appeal to conscience in matters of faith. But actually it was a significant step towards a complete reconstruction of the social system and of the culture itself.

The older assumption that the unity of society requires unity of religious faith at its basis was not without good reasons. If the citizens are to obey the law and the authority of a civil government, they must believe that it is right to do so and that they do not simply succumb to the caprice of those in power. To this end the wielding of power must be regarded legitimate in the name of some authority beyond human arbitrariness and manipulation. In other words, religion must oblige and restrain those in power as well as those upon whom such power is exercised. In such cases the subjects can feel united with those entrusted with legislative and administrative power in common responsibility to some authority that stands above all of them. If there is no religious unity, however, the legitimacy of government is jeopardized and so is social peace among its subjects.

Such reasoning seems long obsolete. But it has never been effectively refuted. It was dismissed for pragmatic reasons, because of the urgent need to restore social peace in spite of religious differences and controversies. Alternative legitimations of government were developed, of course, replacing the religious one. Most important of these alternative legitimations became the idea of representative government. But still the plausibility of such legitimation is more pragmatic than theoretically secure.

IV

So far I suggested that the origin of modern secular culture is to be looked for at the end of the period of religious wars in post-Reformation Europe, generally in the second half of the seventeenth century, though earlier in the case of the Netherlands. In order to restore social peace in multi-confessional societies, the political system, the authority of the law, but also the public culture at large had to be based on a foundation other than religion whose contents had become controversial. The new foundation was human nature. Systems of natural law, a natural morality, even a natural religion were designed in order to satisfy that need. Not least of them was the natural theory of government, presented in terms of social contract theories that demonstrated the need for civil government in order to secure individual survival at the price of the natural freedom of individuals, as with Hobbes, or even in order to secure that individual freedom itself within the limits of reason and law, as with John Locke. Wilhelm Dilthey argued successfully that these theories that reconstructed the law, morality, and the foundations of the political order on the basis of the idea of a common human nature, replaced the old religious foundation of society and thus enabled the European nations to put an end to the period of religious wars. The result was the autonomy of secular society and culture with regard to the churches and the religious tradition.

Other theories on the rise of modern secular culture account for its origin as produced by a process of secularization. The most famous of these theories is perhaps Max Weber's work on the origin of modern capitalism. According to Weber, modern capitalism did not develop from purely economic motivations and factors, but its early history depended on the Calvinist doctrine on predestination and its impact on human conduct. Calvin taught that though God's eternal decree on election or repudiation of an individual person remains mysterious, its provision for a particular person can be guessed on the basis of his or her conduct. If they do the works of regeneration, it is likely that such a person belongs to the chosen ones. For the Calvinist believer, then, there exists a strong motivation to produce works of regeneration. According to Protestant ethics, however, these works consist of what one's worldly vocation requires in terms of conscientious observation of professional duties in secular life. Thus Weber assumed that the rational asceticism of the early capitalists had its source in the otherworldly hope of Calvinist spirituality. That spirituality got secularized, however, when its dedication was put in the service of the multiplication of capital, and in that way it produced a system that finally functions independently of the original motivation.

Other applications of the idea of secularization claimed that the modern belief in progress consists of a secularization of the Christian eschatological hope. The hope for progress aims no longer beyond this life, but seeks improvement within this world. Karl Löwith argued that the development of the modern philosophy of history should be regarded as a secularization of the Christian theology of history, the history of salvation. Philosophy of progress replaces the providence of God that had been believed to guide the historical process toward an eschatological consummation, by the predictive power of science and technology bringing about a future of worldly happiness. Science itself was described as having secularized the theological concept of the law by turning it into the idea of eternal laws of nature, and the ideal of an infinite universe in early modern science was considered as the result of a secularization of the earlier belief in the infinity of God.

In all these examples a religious content is transformed into something immanent and this-worldly. Taken together these examples seemed to suggest that modern culture as a whole was the result of a process of secularization, where instead of God, humanity was put in the center and entrusted with the task of directing the course of history, the task which hitherto had been considered the prerogative of God's providence.

The thesis that modernity arose from a process of secularization got criticized by others like Hans Blumenberg, because it puts modern culture under an obligation to its Christian past so as if the substantial contents of modern culture would originally and truly belong not to modernity, but to its Christian predecessor. Against that Blumenberg asserted that modernity emancipated itself from the oppressive claims of the Christian religion, human autonomy forming the core of the modern mind. In effect, this position was not so far removed from that of the theorists of secularization, because their point was also that the religious heritage had been transformed into something else, since humanity rather than God was put in the center.

There is, however, one fateful flaw in the views of both sides, of those who claim that processes of secularization are responsible for the transition from medieval to modern culture but also of those critics who account for that transition in terms of an emancipation from a culture dominated by religion—both these views conceive of the rise of modern culture in terms of a primarily ideological process. In reality, however, the hard facts of war and civil war, the experience of a disruption of social order and peace in consequence of religious controversies produced the occasion that necessitated the transition to a reconstruction of society and public culture that was no longer based on unanimity in religion, since all endeavors to settle the quarrels between religious parties had proven to be in vain. As soon as one recognizes this situation in early modern history, it becomes understandable that at the origin of modern culture people did not mean to turn away from the Christian faith altogether. Emancipation from religion was not the motivation but rather the longterm result of the processes and pressures on enforcing a reconstruction of society on a foundation other than religious faith. Since in the transition to a public culture based on conceptions of human nature rather than religion, a break with Christianity was not intended, it is also understandable that Christian ideas continued to be effective, but were often transformed in the sense of secularized views.

In a Christian assessment of the relationship of modern culture to Christianity, it is particularly important to appreciate correctly the origins of that culture. *First,* the description of the process just offered dissolves the impression, as if modernity from the outset was opposed to the Christian faith. *Second,* the description shows that the visions of Western Christianity in the post-Reformation period and the lack of tolerance in religious controversies were directly responsible for the rise of a secularist culture. That entails the lesson for the Christian churches that unless they overcome those inherited controversies and restore some form of unity among themselves together with a reappropriation of the idea of tolerance to the Christian conception of not only freedom, but of truth itself, they cannot reasonably expect that the exclusion of religious positions from the public square of modern culture be reconsidered. On the other hand, the memory of the role of religion in the origins of modern culture, favors certain conceptions and prejudices about the divisiveness and intolerance of Christian beliefs, entailing also their irrational character and prejudices, that are very difficult to overcome.

V

A *third* fruit of an appropriate understanding of the way modern culture arose from its Christian past, is an ability to recognize certain ambiguities in basic conceptions of modern culture, ambiguities that are due to a mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements. The most important example of this is the modern idea of freedom. On the one hand, there is a Christian root of the belief that all human persons are born to be free and that therefore their freedom ought to be respected. The Christian meaning of that belief is that all human persons are created in the image of God and meant to enjoy communion with God—in fact it is only communion with God that actually sets us free, according to John 8:36 and Paul, 2 Cor. 3:17. Each human person is cre-

ated in order to enjoy the freedom that issues from communion with God, but it is only in Christ that such freedom is fully realized through redemption from sin and death. The modern idea of freedom, as it was proposed most effectively by John Locke, differs from the Christian view by focusing only on the natural condition of the human person. It differs also, however, from its other source, the ancient stoic ideas of natural law, since the Stoics considered the original freedom and equality of human beings in the state of nature to be lost because of the necessities of a life in society. It was the Reformation doctrine on the freedom of the Christian that made it possible in Locke's thought to claim the original freedom as an actuality for the present state of human life. And in distinction from later libertarian views of individual freedom, Locke thought that pure freedom is necessarily united with reason and therefore relates affirmatively to law. One can take this position as an echo of the Christian conception that freedom depends on being united with the good and, therefore, with God. The prevailing view of individual freedom in modern societies, however, is the right to do as one pleases. It is not connected with any notion of the good as constitutive of such freedom itself. Any idea of freedom, of course, involves the risk of its abuse, due to the conditions of the incompleteness of human existence in history. The risk of abuse, to be sure, has to be accepted wherever the right to decide independently is granted. But it makes a difference, whether the distinction between use and abuse is observed or neglected in talking about the very constitution of human freedom. If it is observed, freedom cannot be equated with unbridled license. But at this point, the modern use of the idea of freedom is deeply ambiguous, and this ambiguity is characteristic of the ambivalence of secular culture with regard to values in general and to the contents and standards of our cultural tradition in particular. Consequently, a consumer attitude is prevailing far beyond the field of goods that can be obtained or sold on the marketplace. The ambiguous relationship to values and to the cultural tradition is also responsible for the weakness of secularist societies.

VI

Under the impact of Max Weber the dominate expectation concerning the future of Western culture was, until recently, that secularization would continue to pervade all aspects of society and of individual behavior while religion would be increasingly marginalized. Since two or three decades, however, it has become evident that secularization or, as others put it, progressive modernization of society produces a feeling of meaninglessness in the public arena of society and culture, and such feeling can lead to frustration and irrational, even violent outbreaks against the social system. This is the weakness of secularist culture and the main reason why it is difficult to predict its future. It depends on how long the majority of people will be ready to pay the price of meaninglessness for the space a secularist society offers to the exercise of individual license. As long as this is combined with a situation of comparative affluence, it might be tolerable for a long time. On the other hand, irrational reactions are unpredictable, especially when the feeling of the legitimacy of social institutions erodes. In this precarious situation, the secular societies of the West would do well to pay more attention to the cultural tradition as a source of social stability and especially strengthen the religious roots of their cultural identity.

This is said with regard to the best self-interest of secular society concerning its own stability and longterm survival. Religion as such has little stake in whether such advice is heeded or not. Contrary to anxieties that were widespread a few decades ago among people attached to religious faith, it can be said presently that the future of religion is less precarious than that of the secularist society. Religion is not going to fall victim to progressive secularization. Religion is not going to disappear, because progressive modernization and secularization of society produce a need for sources that can provide meaning for human life, a meaning that we do not give to our life ourselves, but that we have to receive as given by some authority beyond human manipulation. The resurgent interest in religion and in quasi-religious movements that started a few decades ago took secularist intellectuals by surprise, but could have been predicted (and was predicted by some) as an inevitable reaction to secularism.

The renewed interest in religion, however, did not always turn to the Christian churches. In fact, it does so somewhat rarely. Among the reasons of this peculiar fact there seem to be first the widespread prejudices against Christianity as "conventional religion" in the public consciousness of the secularist culture. Therefore, alternative religious options can seem more attractive. A second group of reasons for the fact that the renaissance of religious sensitivity and yearning so often brings water on other mills than the churches may have to do with the ways the churches or many of them respond to the secularist culture. This is the final issue this lecture is turning to: How should the churches relate to the secularist culture?

VII

The worst way of responding to the challenge of secularism on the part of the Christian churches is to adapt to secular standards in language, thought and the style of life. Unfortunately, many Christians and particularly many clergy consider adaptation to the secular culture a necessary strategy for winning over the people who live in a secularist society and culture. But if members of a secularist society turn to religion at all, they look for something else than they have in that culture. It is the spiritual emptiness of secularism that makes people turn to religion. Therefore, if religion is offered to them in a secularist style, where the religious content is carefully concealed—if it is present at all—it can be counterproductive. This explains, I guess, why in recent decades there has been a decline of membership in mainline churches, while conservative churches grow. What people look for in religion is a plausible alternative or at least a complement to life in a secularist society, and when religion comes to them in a secularist disguise, it is bound to be less attractive.

This argument does not suggest that the churches should stubbornly continue everything that is old-fashioned. The old-fashioned ways of doing things in church may include elements that are really boring or even neurotic. Religion should be presented to members of the secularist society as a vital alternative or complement that is plausible as such. But an alternative to secularism it must be. The presentation of religion, its message and ritual, in secularist disguise inevitably raises the suspicion that the religious substance has sold out and that perhaps the clergy themselves do no longer believe what they are supposed to preach, when they try to get around the

hard issues. It is the proclamation of the risen Christ, the joyous manifestation in him of a new life which overcomes death, that the Church owes to the members of a secularist culture.

That the Church in its teaching and lifestyle should withstand the drain of adaptation to the secularist culture, is not an argument in favor of fundamentalism. It is true that fundamentalism in its many forms, with its apparent strength and certitude, is psychologically often successful with persons who suffer from the emptiness and uncertainties of secularism. Where fundamentalism seizes upon a complete population, it can become a terrible power producing a climate of intolerance and violence. But it lacks a deeper plausibility. Therefore, the apparent certitude of fundamentalists is often shallow.

Instead of the fanatic alternative of fundamentalism, the opposition of Christian proclamation and faith to the spirit of secularism should always seek the alliance with reason. That is in keeping with the classical Christian tradition that since the time of the early church used the alliance with reason and with true philosophy to argue for the universal validity of the Christian teaching. In the confrontation with fundamentalism, the secularists are right in exposing irrational fanaticism and intolerance. The Christian opposition to secularism must not lay itself open to charges like that. Rather, Christian teaching may confidently lay claim to the truth that the secularist spirit thinks no longer worth searching for. While at the time of the enlightenment Christian doctrines were challenged in the name of reason and rational truth, contemporary secularism has itself become irrational. It seems the more promising, in such a situation, to renew the old alliance between the Christian faith and reason. Laying claim to reason, however, requires the acceptance of criticism on the side of Christianity itself and an ethos of self-criticism regarding traditional Christian doctrines and forms of spirituality. Even the Bible is not to be exempt from critical inquiry. The acceptance of biblical criticism is an inevitable implication of a renewed alliance between faith and reason. Our Christian confidence in the truth of God and of His revelation should be vigorous enough to suppose that it will not be overcome by any findings of critical inquiry, if only prejudiced forms of criticism are themselves shown for what they are. It would display unbelief, if we felt it necessary to protect the divine truth of the Bible from critical inquiry. Such inquiry can finally only enhance the splendor of the truth of God contained in the biblical writings. Confidence in that truth, however, is what the Christian proclamation and teaching has to live on and to witness to in confronting the challenge of secularism.