

# Theories of Religion and Social Change

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## I

The late Indian Prime Minister, Nehru, is reported to have said that industrial projects such as foundries and dams were "the new temples of modern India". To him, as to other members of the ruling groups of modernizing countries, such expressions were anything but empty phrases. If sociologists chose to characterize developmentalism (*desarrollismo*) as a large-scale contemporary Cargo Cult, they were not merely fanciful. The quest for modernization is not a straightforward matter of economic policy. It is, rather, one of the most complex processes in recent human history. In it, transnational ideologies as well as nationalistic aspirations, deep moral concerns as well as individual stupidity and bureaucratic incompetence, inexorable structural developments as well as accidental meanderings of local history are merged inextricably. Perhaps this passionate and often blind engagement in a global lottery will some day find a Gibbon. For us, it is too soon to know the outcome.

It is not too soon, however to recognize the historical irony which resides in the sequence of move and counter-move between religion and modernity. Christianity, especially certain varieties of Protestantism, played an important part in the first and second acts of the drama entitled: the emergence of modern industrial societies. It is noticeably absent from the third act. Recent attempts to reenact that classical drama, however, seem to have different protagonists.

Nonetheless, even the most recent movements of modernization show some persistent religious qualities. Prosaic and materialistic as they may

seem, they are a search for transcendence in the midst of historical immanence. The connection between religion and social change has again become a topic of great theoretical, ideological and practical interest.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that religion is the sole moving force of human history. Nor is it proposed that a particular religion, Calvinist Puritanism, was a sufficient cause for the emergence of modern capitalism and, thereby, of modern industrial societies. It is not to be assumed that the recent global modernization processes are merely foreshortened repetitions of the classical model. And, finally, I am not suggesting that such countries as are at least part "modern" in their political economy and technology and which are intimately connected historically, politically and economically with the fully modern industrial states do not represent a special case. Thus countries (such as, for example, those of the Mediterranean) may differ significantly from both the old-established industrial states and the modernizing nations of the Third World in a number of features.

Despite reservations, there are no ifs and buts about one thing. Neither the emergence of the modern industrial states, nor the dynamics of the modernizing new nations, nor the special situation of the part-modern and part-modernizing states can be adequately understood without an account of the role which traditional religion and new religious developments or quasi-religious ideologies have in these processes.

This being the case, the absence of a satisfactory body of theory on the relation of religion to social change is all the more to be lamented. In something that is as greatly mixed with hope and vested interest and as obfuscated with ideology as the way in which modern and modernizing national states are coming to terms with their traditions, their present problems and their aspirations for the future, a body of dispassionate and systematic theory should have proven invaluable. But a generally accepted account of the part which religious ideas, individuals, groups and institutions play in the transformation of society and the metamorphoses of religion itself in this process is harder to come by than say, agreement on the economics of development (not that this field rates high on consensus). This is because it concerns the most concrete things and the most abstract ideas at the same time: everyday life and universal history. The link between the two is system as much as chance, plan as much as folly. No doubt, most theoreticians, and especially social scientists, are likely to underestimate the importance of such determinants of the course of human history as are theoretically unmanageable or at least highly resistant to reasonable explanation as, for example, chance and stupidity. It is therefore probably inevitable that history and its major movements, although they cannot be strictly accounted for by anything that deserves the name of a scientific theory, are yet the subject of many competing theories and ideologies.

But, how about theories by which major aspects of some important processes of history are at least partially understood — theories, in other words, by which, at the cost of great simplification and by ignoring the role of theoretically unmanageable dimensions, we try to understand the place of religion in modern and modernizing societies? If we want to explore this

possibility we must cope with a difficulty of a different kind. The fact that we do not have an adequate theory — a theory in the strict sense of the word — on religion and social change is not accidental. Such a theory would be a theory of human history: a contradiction in terms. But, on the other hand, we do have a large accumulation of ideas, hypotheses and philosophies that are pertinent to the problem at hand. Which of these can be fitted together so as to help in clarifying the relation of religion to social change in a general way?

Were one to take everything that has a bearing on the problem, few ideas in sociology and anthropology could be left out. This is not very surprising in view of the fact that the notion of social change and the notion of religion are or were key categories in most attempts to understand human affairs. But they are as elusive as they are ubiquitous. In many contexts the notions are used to advantage and everyone seems to know what he is talking about. But attempts to define precisely either concept are another matter entirely. If, however, we take the notion of social change merely as a “sensitizing concept” rather than a sharply defined theoretical category it turns out to be all-encompassing. Unchanging societies, unchanging cultures are contradictions in terms. All analytic perspectives of society should be therefore considered partial aspects of a master perspective: social change. On that level of abstraction, social theory is always “theory” of history. One merely needs to think of Comte, Marx, Spencer, Durkheim, Pareto and Max Weber to be reminded of this. But also all major bodies of modern theory in the social sciences contain assumptions about social change, although for the most part, they are not clearly articulated and developed. They are characterized by a complex of meta-theoretical assumptions on history *and* religion, mingling with middle-range “theory” of society “and specific hypotheses about specific institutions.”

## II \*

An inspection of the vast *religionswissenschaftliche*, sociological, ethnographic and historical literature reveals many *ad hoc* explanations of “causal” connections between specific religious institutions, values and personalities and other institutional, cultural and psychological factors. Some of the literature postulates some kind of “functional” relation between them. Most of these explanations refer to narrow historical contexts. They can be found in studies of, say, the importance of Sayyid Ahmad Khan in the development of Islamic modernism, of the influence of Canaanite sources on some ritual or legal innovation in Ancient Judaism, in analyses of the role of Buddhism in Burmese or that of Catholicism in Chilean politics, in interpretations of Melanesian Cargo cults as functional equivalents of something like “nationalism”, in investigations of the political significance of Protestant fundamentalism in Populist movements in the USA or in guesses on the role of Medieval millenarianism in the absorption of social and political protest. They also come occasionally in more systematic form as, for

\* Much of this and the following two sections is taken and adapted from my forthcoming “Theories of Religion and Social Change.”

example, in Srinivas' hypothesis on the mechanism of Sanskritization, or in the innumerable supplements and amendments to, and refutations of, what is taken to be Max Weber's thesis on the Puritan origin of the "spirit" of modern capitalism.

It would be helpful if one could systematize these data and the theoretical bits and pieces which are inextricably bound up with them. Unfortunately, even the scattered examples which I just listed show how difficult this would be. The Marxian "basis/superstructure" scheme, for example, contains an explicit model of the proximate and ultimate causes of historical processes. It is simple and seductively plausible. But it grossly simplifies concrete and specific sociohistoric processes. It is hard to see how either this scheme or any other major theoretical enterprise of some consistency, as, for example, structural-functionalism, could produce *general* knowledge about the conditions under which religious institutions initiate, retard or prevent "change" — *and* at the same time, remain faithful to the varieties of concrete historical data. It is even harder to imagine how they could aid in the explanation of the circumstances in which religious aspects of culture and religious dimensions of individual consciousness exert influence on large-scale institutional processes.

To complicate matters, a final difficulty must be dealt with. Neither in general social theory nor in the sociology of religion is there anything like genuine agreement on what *precisely* is meant by religion. This is not to say that there is not some consensus in obvious matters. Even sociologists do agree that churches have something to do with religion and that belief in God is religious belief. The classification of specialized institutions and verbalized attitudes that are identified as religious by "native speakers" is neither more nor less difficult than the economists' categorization of banks and factories as economic institutions, or the anthropologists' definition of incest rules as kinship norms. There is no serious problem as long as the constructs of the sociologist can be unequivocally based on the conceptions that happen to be available to a given historical variety of common sense. The battle is on, however, when religion, magic and science are to be distinguished from one another or when it comes to such phenomena as psychedelic cults, certain forms of "nationalism", ideological movements rabidly asserting their own secularism, "civic religion", etc.

The history of this battle is well known in general outline even beyond the narrow circle of specialists. The main line of division is between those who use "substantive" criteria in defining religion and those whose approach to religion is based on considerations of "function". There are "psychological" and "sociological" varieties of both approaches. Psychologically oriented "substantivists" claim that there is a distinct kind of experience which is religious by virtue of its content, as, e.g., experience *of* the Holy, *of* Supernatural Beings, etc. The "sociological" variant of this approach usually takes up one of these definitions or relies without much soul-searching on what "native speakers" identify as religious. In addition, the use of the term is generally restricted to those special institutions in which that kind of experience is stabilized, e.g., ritual and doctrine, and to those groups in which it is given clearly recognizable organizational forms, e.g., churches and sects.

Among the various psychological *functions* that are identified as religious, cognitive ones (foremost here is explanation of the unknown) have pride of place. They are often combined with affective aspects (externalization of awe, expression of gratitude, etc.) and pragmatic motives (propitiation, "management" of fate, etc.). Some "functionalists" construct complex compensatory or projective mechanisms, whereas others add to the vast catalogue of human "needs" a religious one that is satisfied by one thing or another. The catalogue of social functions is almost equally diversified. It is nevertheless easier to discern a few common elements. One major variant of this approach defines as religious that which is "ultimately" most significant to individuals, groups of individuals and societies. Another variety stresses the integrative function of religion and defines as religious that common core of values that holds together a culture and helps to maintain the social system. Religion has been also defined as a system of illusions that legitimates the interests of a social class and supports the socio-economic *status-quo*. Proponents of other "functional" views regard the system-integrating and system-preserving functions of religion as historically important but not as sufficiently universal or essential to serve as defining criteria of religion. In their view, the fundamental religious function is "nomization", a term used to refer to the process by which an unstructured, chaotic reality is made to submit to a cognitive state of "law and order". According to this view, the legitimation of the social order and of class-interests is a frequent but not necessary corollary of that elementary function. Finally, the most inclusive "functional" approach defines as religious all processes in which man's biological nature is transcended, collectively, in the construction and maintenance of universes of meaning and, individually, in socialization. The common element of the various "social-functional" approaches is integration, although it does make a difference whether what is "integrated" is the culture, the social system, or the individual, and whether "integration" is seen as a prerequisite for the survival of "systems" or as a strategy of oppression.

"Functionalism" and "substantivism" in the approach to religion are used here merely as labels of convenience. They do not constitute theoretical "schools" — nor are they exclusive clubs, as is shown by several cases of double membership. This is not the occasion for an assessment of the two approaches. But the pro's and contra's that speak respectively for or against the two approaches must be considered in connection with the problem at hand. One may detect a preference of the "functionalists" for global, evolutionary theories of religion and society and a predilection of the "substantivists" for middle- to short-range analyses of specific processes involving religious institutions (especially doctrinal ones) in relation to other institutions (especially economic ones). Evolutionary functionalists may postulate successive stages of the development of socio-historic correlates of the basic religious "function" or revert to an older mode of thought and predict an evolutionary atrophy of the religious "function" as a result of technological control of nature. "Substantivists", on the other hand, may record minute changes in the social composition of a sect and the concurrent *embourgeoisement* of its doctrine in the course of a few decades.

I should not like to maintain that there is a logical necessity that only such combinations should occur. Their preponderance, however, has a certain

plausibility. "Substantive" approaches to religion have one striking advantage: they are as close to commonsense as possible. The operational constructs are practically identical with the common-sense concepts. No complicated translations from the vernacular into sociological categories are necessary. Within a given historical and cultural context, especially a relatively "stable" one, "substantivist" approaches appear uncomplicated, hard-headed, "data-oriented". Small changes in religious institutions or minor transformations of the relation of religion to other social institutions can be adequately explained in the context of a culture that is taken for granted. The "substantivist" approach is less successful in accounting, with any semblance of plausibility, for the wide range of experiences that have been called religious at various times and in different places. "Substantivists" — unless they are content to remain with the social realities of a milieu shaped by the Judaeo-Christian tradition — are forced into a form of what may be called agnostic classificatory relativism.

"Functional" definitions of religion include everything that is identified as religious by the "substantivist" approach. But they also include phenomena that would be classified by the "substantivists" under entirely different rubrics, e.g., as "ideology", "value system", "preference scale", "family relations", "leisure activities", etc. The inclusiveness of "functional" definitions is a mixed blessing. Opponents of the approach usually overstate their case by saying that the definition is all-inclusive and therefore without value. This is tantamount to insisting that political processes can be found only in connection with the institution of the state or economic processes only in a market economy. But it is true that the "functionalists" *should* be able to show cause for the inclusion of phenomena that are not commonly recognized as religious. In the end, the "functionalists", too, must identify historical forms of religion in which the presumably universal religious "function" becomes a datum for the social scientist. Besides, given their theoretical intentions, the "functionalists" cannot rest content with the taxonomical relativism into which "substantivists" are likely to retreat. They must try to account plausibly for the variety of the historical manifestations of the religious "function". Even if they are not successful in this task, they are without doubt much less likely to fall into cultural and historical parochialism than their "substantivist" colleagues. And this is one of the reasons why they show a predilection for rather grand schemes of "evolutionary" or "universal-historical" transformations of religion.

These observations can be summed up in a few words. Most wellknown theories of social change, from the venerable cultural-lag theory to the currently multiplying "modernization" theories, are not theories in a strict sense. As soon as one is willing to settle for such sets of assumptions and propositions as would be called "theory" in more modest usage, however, one discovers that theoretical and meta-theoretical notions on social change as well as religion are at the very core of social theory. At the same time, much of the empirical work that has a bearing on the problem is far removed from the higher levels of generalization. A further difficulty has to do with the nature of religion as a part of social reality. Narrow conceptions tend to be associated with disinterest in accounting for major transformations of religion and society; broad conceptions lead back to the original difficulty of a conception

of the theory of religion and social change as a general theory of society and history.

To be sure, social realities are not plants and attempts to account for their historical transformations cannot be expected to have the comparative logical simplicity of botanical taxonomies. It would be unrealistic to expect this even in those areas of social theory where the boundaries of the problem are clearly marked, where the level of abstraction is established in advance by superordinated theoretical decisions and where the criteria of relevance (i.e., of the explanatory purpose of the particular theory) are precisely defined as, for example, in demographic or econometric models or in the construction of syntactical matrices in linguistics. When it comes to religion, the decision on the level of abstraction is itself a theoretical problem. And when it comes to religion and society in *historical* perspective, the criteria that define the break-off points in explanatory regressions are a shifting function of theoretical interest. Without much doubt, the theoretical interest at work here is of the most general kind imaginable. It is therefore not surprising that there are few if any theories of religion as a factor in social change that could be compared to the more transparent theories on circumscribed social processes. Religion and history generally appear in a different context: as the counterpoint to the muted theme of sociological, anthropological and political meta-theory — the nature of man.

### III

The work of Max Weber deserves to be considered as a paradigm of theories on religion and social change. It is well known that Weber's investigations of religion in the most diverse historical and cultural contexts were motivated by his interest in accounting for the emergence of modern society. It might be well to remember that Weber's studies of Ancient Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism and modern Protestantism were not ends in themselves but means to an end: an understanding of what in modern parlance is called social change. Weber would have been the last to maintain that religion is generally and necessarily its source. But it did hold to him the key to a fascinating puzzle: how did it come about that one particular line of historical development assumed such global importance that it appears retrospectively as the central thread in the history of mankind? But whereas Weber's work shows the advantages of a wide-ranging comparative approach in the study of religion as an element, of various degrees of importance, in the historical transformations of various societies, it also exemplifies what is the inevitable influence of meta-theoretical assumptions on "human nature" and "history" in the formulation of general theories in the social sciences.

Among the assumptions that guided Weber's theoretical view of religion and history, the most important is that religion is ultimately irrational because it originates in the purely subjective dimension of individual existence. Given this assumption Weber's suggestion that the historical role of religion was generally as an agent of rationalization is profoundly ironical: religion contributed involuntarily but decisively to the de-sacralization of the world and thereby perhaps also to its own demise.

It should be noted that Weber's view of rationality is ambiguous. Whatever the value of his multi-faceted view of rationality, I should think that Weber's assumption about the irrational "origin" of religion is anthropologically unsound.

Religion contributes to the historical processes of rationalization of human life on different levels. The inherent predisposition to a "rational" organization of individual conduct that is rooted in the requirements of survival in a natural environment is *generally* supported by religion inasmuch as *all* religion provides a socially stabilized interpretation of reality. All religions systematize solutions of everyday problems and critical situations in life; all religions interpret the world and make it meaningful to the individual by providing a stable framework of orientation for the unstructured, "irrational" subjectivities of individual existence. All religions thus tend to "rationalize" individual biographies; they contribute to the cognitive integration and affective structuring of life and, thereby, to the calculability of conduct. Weber seems to perceive rationalization as an universal process in the history of mankind, as a process that has its roots in the ecological and anthropological conditions of life but also as a process that assumes varied forms in history and that differs significantly in its potency and consequences. He very definitely assigns to religion, this product of the irrational dimension of human existence, the paradoxical function to initiate and to reinforce the process of rationalization.

But Weber did not use "rationalization" merely as an abstract category of historical interpretation and he most decidedly did not employ it as a *deus ex machina* in the explanation of change. His theory of religion and history proceeds on several levels. Religion, in general, plays a decisive role in the systematization of life, and often it initiates historical processes of rationalization. But different religions did this in widely divergent ways because of the variable socio-historical context in which they operated. Weber always insisted on the interdependence of religious aspects (i.e., doctrinal, ethical and ritual ones) and ecological, economic, political and class-elements of social reality.

Between Weber's general theoretical view and a mass of detailed interpretations there can be found hypotheses on an intermediate level. Weber analyzed the *origin* of specific doctrinal or ritual configurations in the ideal *and* material interests of various social strata and traced the *consequences* of such configurations for the individual conduct of life, for institutions and for the social structure as a whole. Most of these hypotheses have become accepted parts of the sociology of religion. They range from fairly general observations on intellectuals serving as the "logical" social base for a specifically religious rationalism (which is the main product of the desire to systematize reality into meaningful cosmos) and from what may be called his general theory of charisma, to more specific hypotheses on the pre-eminent importance of the missionary type of prophecy in triggering change, on the elective affinities between that type of prophecy and a personal, otherworldly conception of God, and to sensitive analyses of the "compromises" imposed on the professional care-takers of doctrine and ritual by the needs of clientele with various material, political and religious interests.



These explanatory hypotheses on intermediate levels of abstraction, it should be stressed again, were not intended by Weber to serve as building blocks for a grand theory of social change. They can be connected to form more or less consistent and plausible interpretive schemes but they do not constitute a deductive "system". They are subordinate to one explanatory aim: to account for the *specific* constellation of religious, economic and political factors which prevailed in that line of historical development that resulted in modern industrial society. Only a superficial and fragmentary reading of Weber could have produced the frequent accusation that, in this account, Weber neglected "economic factors". But it is a fact that Weber treated religion as a distinct and "autonomous" element of human life in society.

In Weber's view the outstanding characteristic of modern society is its "rationality". Needless to say, he did not assume that the exercise of reason had significantly improved over the ages or that a scientific stage had succeeded inferior stages of mental development. But: in modern society he discerned the prevalence of a highly systematic, anonymous and calculable form of law, he found an economy guided by its own principles of accounting and means-ends rationality, he observed a trend to an anonymous, predictable and bureaucratic system of political administration and, last but not least, he noted the social significance of an objective science that made nature technically manageable to a high degree. A social order with these characteristics, consisting of interconnected yet relatively autonomous institutional sub-systems, separately and severally determined by functionally specific criteria of rational organisation and action, was evidently not universal. Nor could Weber conceive of it as the inevitable result of some putative process of evolutionary "differentiation" and therefore as being beyond the need of detailed and specific explanation. He saw "rationality" of modern society as the result of a unique line of historical development which — as soon as it became welded into the structure of society — became divorced from the conditions of its origin. It then either overwhelmed all other lines of historical development or came to serve as a model for them. Weber thus *de facto* assigned a central place to religious motives and religious legitimations in the origin of modernity, although he insisted *de iure*, that it was impossible to decide on causal priorities.

According to Weber, the forms of rationality that characterize the various segments of the social structure of modern societies presuppose a highly rationalized pattern of life. Modern capitalism, in particular, presupposes "rational" forms of conduct and of biographical discipline that derive, again according to Weber, from certain elements in the Protestant view of the world. But the roots of modern "rationality" he traced farther back, to constellations of structural and cultural elements in which religion again played an important role: to the "Entzauberung" (disenchantment) of the world view that was initiated by the single-minded prophets of Yahwist monotheism and which was continued and "compromised" by competing groups of priests catering to an urban, petit-bourgeois clientele.

It was not my intention to present Weber's work. That has been done competently by others. But the interconnectedness of meta-theoretical

assumptions, explicit theory and detailed historical hypotheses in Weber's work is paradigmatic for sociological approaches to religion and social change. It is exemplary in its intellectual sweep but it also shows how pervasive can be the influence of unstated assumptions. There is another reason for looking at Weber closely. Some of Weber's hypotheses and interpretations had to be revised, although he was seriously in error in remarkably few instances even in the light of modern scholarship. Much detailed information was added, of course, to what was known to Weber, e.g., on commerce in Renaissance Italy, on the economic ethics of the Dutch Reformed church in the early 17th century, on the preexilic prophets, on the Essenes, on the workings of the ancient Chinese bureaucracy, etc. But a rereading of Weber leads to a sobering insight. Despite advances in knowledge in the social sciences, despite a veritable explosion of information at least on the level of primary data, despite steps forward in the formalization of certain types of theory, we have not come very far in understanding the social process of history. We have perhaps improved our understanding of certain social processes considered as separate "chains of causation" — but such understanding does not seem to add up to a global theory of modernization. Structural-functionalism turned out to be a dead-end at least in this respect, biological or physicalist theories hardly need to be taken seriously, and Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of history have been notable mainly for the revitalization of their rhetoric. A brief review of the various "theories" of secularization to which I shall now turn will show that in this respect we are still almost in the same place in which Weber was just about two generations ago.

#### IV

The idea that sound knowledge of man and society should require a systematic account of history was novel at the time of Montesquieu. There was then still something startling about the assertion that history was an intelligible concatenation of human actions, actions that were only partly determined by the laws of nature. There was less than a generation between the deaths of Montesquieu and of Vico and the birth of Hegel, and the lives of Hegel and Marx did overlap. In little more than a hundred years, the first "secular" transpositions of a Christian conception of the intelligible workings of a divine plan in human history culminated in a secularized eschatology, i.e., a philosophy of universal history. After the French Revolution no social philosophy and no "anthropology" that was not intrinsically a philosophy of history could hope to hold its own among the *ideologues* — from the Jacobins and Utopians, the Traditionalists and Romantics to the Comteans, Hegelians, Marxists and Social Evolutionists. The most important sociological traditions originate in the philosophical and ideological positions of this period; to say that the "grand theories" of the early days of modern sociology necessarily contained a "philosophy" of history is therefore merely stating the obvious. It is not quite as obvious however, that the conceptions of history that entered sociological thinking then, and which became the background of contemporary theorizing, were "theories" of secularization in fact, if not in name. It should be noted, however, that some changes have indeed taken place since that time.

One thing that has changed is that almost all contemporary “theorists” of secularization — with a few notable exceptions — take it for granted that religion is an epiphaenomenon.

Some of the Catholic sociologists of religion, for example, might dislike to think of themselves as Marxists but they do not hesitate to assume a one-way relationship of causation from, e.g., “industrialization” to declining church attendance. Yet there are partial exceptions. Durkheim, in this respect the intellectual grandson of Saint-Simon as well as Comte, noted the declining importance of traditional religion, but he was nonetheless convinced that *some* kind of religion, a sacred core of the *conscience collective*, would reflect and, at the same time, support the integration of modern societies. On these lines of thought, new forms of religion are equally conceivable as new forms of solidarity. And as was already noted, the definitive *Entzauberung* of the world and the apparent “autonomy” of the major institutional segments of modern social structures represented, to Weber, the final stage of a specifically occidental process of secularization. But to Weber this process was part of the universal rationalization of human life and society in the history of mankind. Those “theorists” of secularization who prognosticate the imminent end of religion by pointing to the inexorable consequences of the apparently self-sufficient “functional rationalities” of the economy and of politics, to the dominant spirit of science and to the irrelevance — to “objective” economic and political processes — of the pockets of irrationality, may justly invoke Weber. But it must be added that such “theorists” have become heirs precisely to those ambiguities in Weber’s thought that derive from his view of what is rational and what is irrational in human existence.

In the “theories” of secularization some systematic thought is given today to the relation of religion to modern society. And yet, despite this and despite the common elements in secularization theories, there is little theoretical *consensus* on secularization. It is therefore rather curious that secularization is introduced as a variable into some general theories of modernization. Less is known about the *explanans* than the *explanandum*.

It is easy to see why this should be so. Secularization is a notion that has its roots in the common experience of an entire epoch. It is shaped by the need of the intellectuals to give a comprehensive account of the origins and of the essence of *their* time, of their unique place in history.

It is not surprising that the notion of secularization is both more *and* less than a concept or a theory. Although it has empirical points of reference it is primarily a *mythological* account of the emergence of the modern world, a world that is felt to differ absolutely from what came before it. I use the term “mythological” in its dictionary definition: a historical narrative which contains a number of fictitious elements.

What *is* surprising is the persistence of this notion in social theory and its pervasiveness in the sociology of religion. For better or for worse, notions of secularization are part of an inheritance from the early days of sociology. They are subverted by ideological simplifications. But they also represent a

manifestation of the wish for systematic knowledge of the fate of the modern world.

Instead of a detailed presentation of all secularization "theories" it may be appropriate to provide two brief illustrations, one of a "theory" with global intentions, based on a "functionalist" view of religion, and another of a "theory" based on a "substantivist" approach with the explicit aim to account for the fate of Christianity in industrial societies.

For Parson's, religion like everything else in the social, cultural and personality systems, is subject to differentiation. The religious sphere is separated from the non-religious in the course of social evolution; it has become more highly individuated on the personality level, cognitively distinct on the cultural and specialized on the structural level. But the original (Judaean-Christian) values of Western society are still incorporated in the non-religious spheres of modern society. Religion, to put it in a nutshell, has come into its own by being restricted to its proper sphere. It does not lose its functions in consequence of the fact that it has become differentiated. Secularization is no more than a historical *facette* of an evolutionary process.

For Berger, secularization is a process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. While secularization is not restricted to Christianity, it does find its most fateful historical incarnation in Western history. It is here that "an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations" can be found. He rejects monocausal explanations of this presumed state of affairs. He points to various combinations of structural and cultural factors (especially to "pluralism") that have weakened the plausibility structure of established religion. He accepts, the opinion that, in the main, Protestantism was a prelude to secularization. He turns to Weber in order to show the more distant source of secularization in the beginnings of *Entzauberung* in the Old Testament. Moreover, he analyses some of the "secularizing" consequences of the institutional specialization of religion in Western history.

Even these brief and rather inadequate descriptions of two "theories" of secularization may give rise to the question whether the authors are talking about the same processes. Differentiation, institutional specialization, rationalization, *Entzauberung* of the world, pluralism, "individualization", "subjectivization", etc. — one may be able to agree on the explanatory value and the empirical references of these concepts. But one is dubious whether separately, or in some combination they could explain a process whose very existence is doubted by some "substantivists" and most "functionalists".

To sum it up: Despite considerable study and research in recent decades, it is remarkable that no agreement could be yet reached on which secularization "theories" are to be favored over others. In this respect, as some others, recent "theories" are not much of an improvement on the older, more sweeping theories. In such a situation it is customary to find fault with the theories for not being sufficiently "operationalized". This is a valid point, to be sure. But in the case of recent secularization "theories" the difficulties are attributable

in equal or even higher degree to the fact that suppressed or poorly articulated meta-theoretical positions rather than explicit theory guide decisions about what constitutes *relevant* data for a given theory, decisions which are then camouflaged as ordinary issues of research methodology.

The meta-theoretical assumptions and the ideological background of the "classical" theories of society, history and religion, as well as the recent "theories" of secularization require more systematic reflection than I can offer here. I hope to have shown, however, why a systematic and generally acceptable account of the transformations of religion in modern society and of its significance for the emergence of modern society does not exist, despite a rich theoretical tradition and an impressive array of empirical studies. I did try to point out some of the basic difficulties with which such an account must cope. It is therefore with some hesitation that I now extract those elements of various "classical" and recent theories that seem to fit into an approximation of such an account.

## V \*

Most attempts to analyze the relation of religion to social change, and almost all accounts of the relation to modernity, suffer from a historically and culturally limited and narrow view of what is religion.

Few people hesitate to acknowledge the presence of religion in certain instances where the label would not mean much, if anything, to the members of societies in question — with the notable exception of modern society. This is the consequence of the myth of secularization. Historians and cultural anthropologists describe and analyze the religion of societies in which religion has no distinct institutional bases. They have no difficulty in isolating analytically a religious part of the culture. To be sure, not all cultures contain a distinct supernatural level, although many do. But in all cultures there are norms that bestow some "ultimate" significance upon common experience, norms that are superordinated to the rules which govern conduct in everyday life. Since this bi-polarity marks all societies, archaic as well as modern, we have here a dimension for the general analysis of religion. Closer study shows, of course, that norms of "ultimate" significance are not segregated from the cognitive and affective structure of ordinary experience with equal sharpness in all societies. An important question to ask is, therefore, whether a culture is bisected or divided in some other manner into a sacred and a profane part and — *whatever* the line of division — whether the sacred universe blends with the world of everyday life or is clearly set apart.

A second and also highly important dimension in the study of religion is the *social* base of the sacred universe. As a part of the culture, the sacred reality is maintained and transmitted by social processes and institutions. There are two basic kinds of arrangements. The maintenance and transmission of the sacred universe may be based on the social structure in its entirety. In this case

\* Much of what follows is based on my "Secularizzazione: un mi contemporanea", in *Cultura e Politica*.

the sacred reality is diffused among the various parts and institutions of society and the differences that may occur in the distribution of the sacred universe are not structurally "necessary". Religion in archaic societies and, in part, at least, in the simpler traditional civilizations, has this kind of general social foundation. Collective representations that have a sacred quality shape and justify the norms of kinship, the division of labor and the exercise of power. On the subjective side, the meaning of all ordinary conduct, insofar as it is defined and sanctioned by institutions, is linked either directly or indirectly to the transcendent reality of the sacred universe. The sacred universe legitimates conduct in a great variety of social situations and bestows "ultimate" significance on all relevant stages of an individual biography. In consequence, there is nothing — whether it be their economy, kinship or political organization — that one would want to know about such societies that can be *fully* understood without recourse to their religion.

Evidently this is not the case in highly complex societies. It is emphatically not the case in contemporary industrial societies. Such societies have a social structure that consists of relatively independent institutional sub-systems. The economy, politics, kinship, etc. can be analyzed as to their internal organization and social functions without reference to religion. If the concept of secularization were used to refer to this state of affairs only, there would be little room for confusion. But it would also lose much of its mythological force.

It seems that during the greater part of human history the entire social structure supported a sacred reality while the sacred universe legitimated the entire social structure. To be sure, there were differences of emphasis and minor variations of the basic arrangement. In archaic societies religious representations were indeed widely diffused among the various institutions, while in somewhat more complex societies the sacred universe did have strong and highly visible ties with certain selected institutions such as divine kingship and the like. Institutional specialization of religion, however, radically changed the relation between the sacred universe and the social structure. One particular set of institutions now maintains and transmits the sacred reality exclusively. Religion has a distinct and limited institutional location in the social order.

Institutional specialization of religion is part of a global process of social change. In archaic societies institutions are characterized by what Redfield called "primitive fusion". What men do in such societies cannot be neatly fitted into institutional categories. The "logic" of the sacred universe constitutes the dominant "logic" of all institutions. It joins together the meanings of the most diverse actions, combines them so that they form coherent passages in the life of the individual and integrates them with the history of the community. In traditional civilization, it is true, certain institutions tend toward consolidation. Increasing complexity in the division of labor, the production of a surplus over the subsistence minimum, growth of supra-communal and supra-tribal political organization, emergence of distinct occupational roles as well as the formation of distinct social classes are processes connected with functional differentiation of institutions. Yet the

“logic of the sacred universe continues to support and legitimate the entire social structure.”

In modern societies, however, “bundles” of various institutions are tied together to form functionally specialized domains. The most important are the economy and the state. In contemporary industrial societies, institutions may be viewed as highly interdependent elements in rather autonomous segments of the social structure. The norms of each segment are comparatively independent of the norms in other segments. Most importantly, their connection with the traditional sacred universe is attenuated if not entirely broken. In the final consequence, the social structure ceases to mediate in a consistent manner between the sacred cosmos and subjective consciousness.

The two main versions of the myth of secularization, one based on the romantic notion of a Golden Age of Christian religion, the other inspired by the rationalist utopia of progressive “liberation” of man from the dark forces of unreason, rest on a misconception. They seem to take for granted that *social universality of religion can endure in conjunction with institutional specialization*. I suggest that their conjunction was *necessarily* transitory. Religion comes to be institutionally specialized in societies that are marked by a high degree of structural complexity. Social universality of religion, on the other hand, presupposes a highly integrated social structure and a fairly homogeneous socialization of individuals into the social order.

The origin of the myth of secularization may be in part explained by a unique constellation. When the Western Empire collapsed, Christian religion had already achieved a high degree of institutional specialization. In the background there was the sharp segregation of a sacred cosmos in Ancient Israel, accompanied by an unprecedented de-mythologization and depersonalization of nature. There was a cosmopolitan pluralism of world views, and specifically religious communities proliferated. Political and economic institutions had also achieved a certain autonomy. In the post-Constantinian age, the sacred reality was held in monopoly by theological and administrative experts who systematized the doctrine and standardized the ritual. Then came a period of reversals in the evolution of a highly differentiated social order. Throughout the early Middle Ages the economy moved to a simpler level of organization, and politics was “re-tribalized”. The Christian sacred cosmos, however, retained its organizational basis as an institutionally specialized form of religion. No serious challenge arose to it from within as long as Christianity provided a universal principle for the legitimation of new institutions.

Religion had thus retained a high degree of institutional specialization while the political and economic domains had not yet achieved — or regained — autonomy from the sacred cosmos. This unique and transitory historical situation is mistaken by the contemporary myth of secularization for a lasting structural arrangement between society and religion.

Looking back we should be able to see the *intrinsic* instability of this arrangement. Bitter jurisdictional disputes between the institutional domains mark the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. The

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

This development took a peculiar turn in the nineteenth century. As the traditional sacred cosmos ceased to infuse, with significance, wide areas of everyday life, certain values that originated in the context of political and economic change gained entry into the increasingly more permeable sacred cosmos of industrial society. Political and economic ideologies, expressing first the aspirations and then the vested interests of the bourgeoisie, often in combination with rising nationalism, or articulating the hopes of the proletariat either merged with or replaced the dominant Christian themes. This phase is apparently repeated in modernizing countries in a significantly different way: the bourgeois and proletarian strata were replaced by ruling elites — generally trained and supported by global ideological centers — as the carriers of change.

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

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



Different values and orientations that are "ultimately" significant for the individual are transmitted in structurally (primarily class) determined variants of socialization. But they are not massively supported by the social order as a whole. One significant partial exception are those values and attitudes that are linked to nationalism, egalitarian socialism or fascism. This does not mean that religion in modernizing societies is identical with nationalism, socialism or fascism. It does mean that these systems of "ultimate" significance are the ones that are likely to be systematically connected with modernizing aspirations or opposition to modernization on the part of the ruling elites in these countries. They are therefore the only orientations of a religious character which are also likely to have direct institutional support. The privatized forms of religion which are more widely distributed in fully established modern industrial societies, and which are by their very character almost invisible socially, are unlikely to have a broad social base in modernizing countries.

In short, the story resembles the old story in some respects, but also differs from it sufficiently to confound all simple theories of the role of religion in social change.