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Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept

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This essay provides an introduction to the secularization debate as it presents itself at the end of the 1990s. After a conceptual survey from the mid-1960s to the present, we focus on the empirical and historical elements that undergird both the claims of secularization theory and those of its principal critics. Secularization theory is placed in relationship both to the Religion of Reason of the Enlightenment and developments in European religious historiography during the nineteenth century. The underlying conflict to be resolved with respect to "secularization" is whether the term can be used in a relatively value-neutral analytic way or whether it inherently carries unsubstantiated value presuppositions.

In 1967 the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* published a collection of essays on church-sect theory that some people at the time interpreted as intending an obituary for the church-sect concept. If so, it must instead be taken as evidence for the resurrection of the dead, for at least a decade of both debate and research, use and abuse, of the church-sect framework occurred before a gradual consensus arrived in the 1980s, wherein sociologists of religion in the United States achieved a level of comfort in talking about sectarian religion and mainline denominations, spared prolegomena wherein we defend our use of these concepts. In that process, though, something else happened as well; namely, the concept of "cult" increasingly became dropped from use in the sociology of religion as already too emotionally loaded to carry scientific freight (see Richardson 1993). Like the concept "race" in ethnic studies, we at least put "cult" in scarequotes. We can talk about anticultism, like racism, but to term a group a cult is sociological bad manners: it biases analyses from the start.

Like church-sect and so many other seminal concepts in the sociology of religion, the term *secularization* was given to us by Max Weber (1930), but ever so lightly, and was picked up by his sometime associate Ernst Troeltsch (1958). It did not appear significantly in American sociology, however, until the late

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1950s. In spite of a cautionary article by Larry Shiner as early as 1967 about the muddled meanings that had come to be attached to the term, hence his suggestion that "we drop the word entirely" (see also Martin 1965), nevertheless by the early 1970s, secularization was the reigning dogma in the field.[1]

Twenty years would pass between Shiner's expression of reservations about secularization "theory" and the next major assault on the thesis. In between, Bryan Wilson, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Karel Dobbelaere would become the principal proponents of the concept. Not insignificantly, Wilson, Luckmann, and Dobbelaere are Europeans, and Berger is a European emigré to the United States. All were products of a European Christian intellectual heritage and educational system that, we might now say, romanticized the religious past of their nations.

It was in his 1986 presidential address to the Southern Sociological Society that Jeffrey Hadden (1987: 588) presented a clear, comprehensive, and trenchant analysis of the weakness of secularization theory in both in its genesis and its predicted outcomes. The core of his argument is that in and from its genesis secularization constituted a "*doctrine* more than a theory" based on "presuppositions that . . . represent a taken-for-granted *ideology*" of social scientists "rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions." Over time in social scientific circles (which continued to widen in their influence), "*the idea of secularization became sacralized*," that is, a belief system accepted "on faith." Even more than a statement about the present, the ideology of secularization relies on beliefs about the past. (This flank of Hadden's assault, as a matter of fact, was presaged in a series of pieces by Roland Robertson beginning as early as 1971.)

The second thrust of Hadden's attack is a fourfold challenge: (1) Secularization theory is internally weak in its logical structure — "a hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas" — first so revealed, indeed, by Shiner in 1967; (2) such secularization *theory* as does exist is unsupported by data after more than twenty years of research, a point also made by Glasner (1977) in his critique of secularization theory as a "myth" a decade earlier;[2] (3) New Religious Movements (NRMs) have appeared and persisted in the most supposedly secularized societies — indeed, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have shown that the lower the level of practice or saturation on the part of traditional religion in modern societies, the higher the likelihood of NRM activity;[3] and finally, (4) religion

[1] The course of the Shiner article is an interesting case of what Robert Merton (1968) has called the "Matthew effect" in the sciences: Shiner continued no publishing program in this area, and although his article is frequently cited in passing, it apparently had no effect on stemming the tide of secularization theory.

[2] Similarly Peter Berger wrote in 1992 of the sociological prediction of secularization "theory": "By the late 1970s it had been falsified with a vengeance. As it turned out, the theory never had much empirical substance to begin with" (p. 15). The Glasner book also suffers from the Matthew effect.

[3] An alternative view, proposed by Wilson (e.g., 1985) *inter alia*, sees the rise of NRMs as a "proof" of secularization; Berger (1996-1997: 9) now terms this idea "the last-gasp thesis," and judges it to be "singularly unpersuasive."

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has emerged as a vital force in the world political order (cf., Hadden and Shupe 1989). Hadden concludes this thrust with a series of forecasts of the place of religion in society and in sociology for the next fifty years, concluding that we should "return once more to the past to see the future. Max Weber's search for clues about the place of religion in human society took him deeply into the study of the world's major religions. The future will take us back to where Weber began" (Hadden 1987: 598, 609 *et passim*).

To what extent does the debate over secularization theory, represented in the articles of this issue, reflect some of the same concerns that ran through church-sect theory three decades ago? In other words, is "secularization" an analytic tool or a value judgment? Karel Dobbelaere refers to a "descriptive concept" that denotes "the particularization in the religious subsystem of the general process of functional differentiation on the macro level." And Rodney Stark, otherwise contending with Dobbelaere, agrees that "[i]f this were all that secularization means, there would be nothing to argue about." What Stark argues, however, is that the concept carries much more freight than this and in so doing makes assertions about people's religiousness that are not so.[4] Although Stark and his colleagues once used such phrases as "limits to secularization" or secularization as a "self-limiting process" (in, e.g., Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987), he now wishes to bury the term.[5]

BACKGROUND

The word "secularization" itself comes from the Latin *sæculum*, which could be taken to mean both an age (or era) but also, at least by the fourth and fifth centuries, "the world," probably as an extension of the idea of a "spirit of an age." By this date, too, the word had already developed an ambiguous meaning. It could be used to mean something like unending time (the phrases "world without end" or "forever and ever" that still often appear at the end of formal Christian prayers are translations of the Latin *in sæcula sæculorum*), or the world "out there" (for example, monastic priests, who were "enclosed" and under a formal "rule of life," were distinguished from "secular" clergy, meaning the parish clergy who served the people "out in the world"), but it was also used to mean a life or life-style that is at odds with God (thus people would enter monastic life to flee "the world"). Later the term would come to be used to distinguish between civil and ecclesiastical law, lands, and possessions. In the nineteenth century, furthermore, the term was adopted formally by the British freethinker

[4] Curiously, Stark remains one of those sociologists of religion who continues to try to use "cult" as an analytic concept, though "*in pianissimo*" as compared to his earlier work.

[5] The secularization debate, also like church-sect "theory" in its heyday, continues to burgeon even as we write, and is by no means restricted to the articles in this volume (recent examples include Bruce 1992; Sommerville 1994, 1998; Yamane 1997, 1998; Laermans *et al.* 1998).

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G.J. Holyoake, who founded the Secular Society as a group committed to a just world order and moral program of individual action that would address human problems without the use of supernatural explanations. Thus, the term already had an ambiguous, but increasingly negative, use by the time it was adapted into social science (see Shiner 1967).

To the extent that one may ever speak legitimately of a single integrating focus in a body of work as extensive as Max Weber's corpus, it must be said to be that of *rationalität*, or *the processes of the rationalization of action*, the specific form of *social change* that enabled "the modern world" to come into being. Weber was interested in how it was that methods of rational calculation had come to dominate virtually the entirety of modern life. He referred to this as the "spirit of capitalism." His studies convinced him that from the sixteenth century forward a process had been occurring in Western civilization as a result of which one after another sphere of life had become subject to the belief that explanations for events could be found within this-worldly experience and the application of human reason; as Shiner (1967: 216) puts it, the world was "a self-contained causal nexus." The consequence of this worldview was that explanations referring to forces outside of this world were constantly being laid aside. The flip side of rationalization Weber termed *Entzauberung* — a word usually translated *disenchantment*, though perhaps more accurately rendered de-magi-fication or de-myster-ization. Disenchantment did not simply mean that people did not believe in the old mysteries of religion, but rather that the concept of mystery or "the mysterious" itself was devalued. Mystery was seen not as something to be entered into but something to be conquered by human reason, ingenuity, and the products of technology. Weber gave the name secularization to this double-sided rationalization-disenchantment process in religion. Secularization was both the process and the result of the process; however, it is also the case that the term occurs only rarely in Weber's writing.

It is not clear that Weber himself considered secularization to be a specific domain of the sociology of religion. In his essay "Science as a vocation" (1946: 139), *intellectualization* is used as a virtual synonym. In some respects then, it seems that secularization ought to be more properly considered an aspect of the sociology of knowledge, hence to deal with questions of *epistemology*, the ways people "know" or the conditions upon which we receive "knowledge" of "the ways the world works" (see Glock 1988). Weber's claim is that appeals to divine authority have lost credibility relative to the past as providing sure knowledge for social action, and that practical economic considerations (as contrasted to a heavenly bank account) have come to play an increasing role in measuring the worth of knowledge. At most, "the religious point of view" will be treated as one among many competing claims to authority. Priests, ministers, rabbis, and mullahs are less sought for solving world problems than economists, physicists, and political scientists, while psychologists, social workers, and medical doctors are the societally recognized experts at the individual or microsocial level. Mark

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Chaves (1994), for example, explicates secularization along these lines in referring to it as a declining scope of religious authority.

Olivier Tschannen (1991) has provided a graphic summary of the "exemplary infrastructure" or "primitive cognitive apparatus" that may be derived from the efforts of various secularization theorists. In the boldest terms, as Shiner points out however, secularization theory's claims mean the "decline of religion," that is, religion's "previously accepted symbols, doctrines, and institutions lose their prestige and influence. The culmination of secularization would be a religionless society." In this issue Rodney Stark most fully accepts this definition as paradigmatic of secularization " theory," and it is this one with which he takes issue. All of the propositions advanced by Shiner as well as the map of Tschannen share a common presupposition: namely, that there has been an enormously significant *change* in the ways in which society and religion have interacted in the past from the ways they do now. With this there is no argument among our contributors.

At the purely descriptive level, secularization may be said to refer to the process of the separation of state and church in Europe, which was much more complex than it was in the United States. Tschannen's application of his map to specific secularization theorists shows that the one element they have in common is that of institutional *differentiation*. According to Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), for example, the entire European social system was characterized by a state of *superimposition* wherein one institutional system overlay another, and each had a hand in the other. Church, state, education, health and welfare, the law, and the like were so intertwined that sundering them caused a significant shock to all sectors of the system, from which religion was not immune. The United States, by contrast, was characterized by relative pluralism from its earliest years (cf., Butler 1990; Christiano 1987: 49-60; Conser and Twiss 1997; Finke *et al.* 1996; Finke and Stark 1988). Church and state were constitutionally separated, and free market, *laissez-faire* economics circumscribed the role of the state as far as other institutional sectors of the social system were concerned. Nevertheless, even in the United States there grew to be a view that "religion" was in decline.

Two important observations before we discuss the thesis and the evidence further: The first is that *secularization*, secularity, or the secular *is always relative to* some definition of *religion* or the religious. As Edward Bailey puts it, "[S]*ecular* is really quite easy to define! Its meaning keeps changing yet remains consistent. It always means, simply, the opposite of 'religious' — whatever that means" (1998: 18). This suggests not only that the "definition of religion question" is not an arcane philosophical debate, but it also shows how premises can influence evidence and outcomes, hence why it is important to examine premises carefully. The second observation is that the "truth" of secularization claims depends on *historical* evidence. If we say, "people are less religious now than they were a hundred years ago," we have not only invoked some presumed definition of religion, but we have also said that we know how religious people were a

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hundred years ago. Yves Lambert makes this point clearly in setting contemporary survey data in context, but it somewhat bedevils Dobbelaere's argument that NRMs in effect validate the secularization thesis because they are responses to secularization, while at the same time he does not see the pillarization process in Europe as emerging in the same way in an earlier epoch.

THE ARGUMENTS

There is no question that in most of the Western world there has been at least sufficient separation of church and state, the primary locus of differentiation, that people are capable both of living their lives apart from direct "interference" on the part of religion and that people may choose among various religions without suffering civil disabilities. If only this is what is meant by secularization, then there is no debate over "the secularization thesis." But if this is all that secularization meant, there would also have been far less excitement about the topic. It would not have been so much something to investigate as simply to state as a factual condition (or as not existing in other parts of the world). Indeed, on this basis we could develop a fairly simple classification system of those societies that had or had not been legally "secularized." (In fact the term is used in this uncontroversial way to describe institutions that once were controlled by a religious organization and now are not; thus a school or hospital may be said to have been "secularized in 1983," meaning that in that year it went from being under the formal ownership of a religious organization to control by an independent board of trustees or a for-profit corporation.)

There is no doubt that the separation of church and state has consequences for religious organizations and for the lives of individual citizens (see Finke 1990; Finke and Stark 1992). At the organizational level, for example, a previously established religion may lose tax support, as happened in colonial Virginia; on the other hand, as also happened in colonial Virginia, other religious organizations gain free access to the religious "market" — that is, other religions get to operate on an equal basis. Whether or not this means the decline of religion, therefore, becomes an empirical question. Individuals no longer may be required to pay taxes to support religion, and they may also be required to conform to certain state norms (like registering names of children at birth rather than waiting to name a baby in a religious ritual like baptism or circumcision). These may open or close religious options and freedoms, as people can choose to support or reject religious alternatives.

The principal thrust in secularization theory has, however, been stronger than simply church-state issues or the scope of religious authority. It has been a claim that, in the face of scientific rationality, religion's influence on all aspects of life — from personal habits to social institutions — is in dramatic decline. Regardless of the sociostructural level of the argument, the underlying assumption was that "people" have become or are becoming "less religious." Many social

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theorists (e.g., Wallace 1966) doubted that modernity could combine religious traditions with the overpowering impersonal features of our time: scientific research, humanistic education, high-technology multinational capitalism, bureaucratic organizational life, and so on. Reacting on the basis of a functional definition of religion, religion appeared to these theorists denuded of almost all the functions it had previously appeared to perform. In this view, religion harked back to some prior level of human evolution and was now uselessly appended to the modern cultural repertoire. People today are awed by human achievements, not divine forces; societies of the future would be constructed around these, not antiquity's notion of the "sacred."

This view was evoked in some forms of empirical research as well. In the 1920s, for example, the Institute of Social and Religious Research sent Robert and Helen Lynd to the American midwest to study the life of a "typical" community. They went to Lynd's home state of Indiana and settled on Muncie, a town sufficiently unexceptional to allow them to attach to it the pseudonym, *Middletown*. Robert Lynd returned to Muncie again in 1935 to see how typical "Middle America" was surviving the Depression. *Middletown in transition* was the product of this research. Both of these books included assessments of Muncie's religious organizations, but neither yielded positive outlooks. In the first book, the Lynds concluded that "religious life as represented by the churches is less pervasive than a generation ago" (1929: 407; but note that neither they nor anyone else had done research on the community's religious life a generation previously). In the Depression-era assessment, religious life seemed to have declined further: people attending church were older and appeared more passive, as if reflecting the economic downturn. Although the religious institutions continued to provide "the reassurance so urgently needed" in the face of "the perplexities of a too-perplexing world," these organizations were facing a future of continued displacement (1937: 315).

In the 1970s, however, the National Science Foundation funded a re-study of Middletown: "Middletown III." If religious organizations were on the skids already in the mid-1930s, what would be their state fifty years out from the original study? The results came as a surprise to the proponents of the "decline of religion" thesis. This project plotted 15 time series, or sequences, of religion data for Muncie between 1924 and 1978. Among the 15 trend lines, only two pointed downward (which would indicate a secularization effect). Three more showed no trend, while the remaining 10 (67 percent of the total) displayed an upward curve, showing *greater religiosity* in Middletown in the 1970s than the 1920s (Caplow 1982; Caplow *et al.* 1983: 34-35, 294-97).

National survey data from the late 1940s to the present support this finding. In *Religious change in America*, Andrew Greeley reported that in every Gallup Poll that has asked whether or not the respondent believes in God, more than 90 percent say they do. Three fourths believe in the possibility of life after death and in the messianic divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. Around 70 percent, with only

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the slightest deviation, think that "people who have led good lives" receive some reward in the hereafter, while over 50 percent also believe in hell. Ninety percent of Americans pray to God, and about two-thirds claim membership in a religious congregation; neither of these percentages has changed significantly in fifty years. About 40 percent of Americans claim to attend religious services each week, and this fraction has altered little over the last thirty years (Greeley 1989: 13-15, 20-43, 58).[6]

Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's *The churching of America* (1992) has provided a wealth of historical data to undergird these observations across two centuries. They mine early records, for example, to estimate that only 17 percent of Americans claimed religious membership at the time of the Revolution, and that in spite of the revivalism of the Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century, by 1850, only 34 percent claimed membership. While this represents a 100 percent increase over the span, it is also only half the religious organizational membership that we find in the United States today.

Americans in a vast majority, according to survey data, do not appear to have abandoned secularization theory's dying religion, nor to have fulfilled the Lynds' predictions. "The replacement of religious superstition by enlightened science predicted since the time of Voltaire may at last be taking place," Greeley noted tongue-in-cheek in the late 1960s, when secularization theory was all the rage. "It may well be; though it should be remembered that the prediction has generally been wrong every time it has been made" (1969: 6; cf., Greeley 1995; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Now, thirty years after Greeley's generous concession, it seems more true than ever that the predicted demise of religion is probably wrong, certainly premature. Virtually no empirical research supports the prediction of a societal slide from a peak of sacrality into a valley of secularity; indeed, the issues of conceptual confusion raised thirty years ago by Shiner now seem all the more urgent for social scientific theory development.

It was Sigmund Freud who referred to religion as "the future of an illusion," but to the contrary, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge in *The future of religion: Secularization, revival, and cult formation* (1985: 1) claim "the vision of a religionless future is but illusion." Contrary to the unilinear theories of religious decline, Stark and Bainbridge there adopt a more cyclical approach reminiscent of the general theory of sociocultural development of Pitirim Sorokin (1937-1941). As inevitable change takes place in social systems, religions that responded to the needs and conditions in conceptual forms suited to one historical epoch become less effective in addressing core problems of human experience. Death is one such example. The problem does not go away. The death rate is the same: one per person. Hence, the need for a solution remains.

Two things happen: on the one hand, movements arise from within existing

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[6] Recently, the credibility of American reports of high weekly church attendance has been called into question (see Hadaway *et al.* 1993; but cf., Caplow 1998; Woodberry 1998).

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religious organizations that attempt to restate with even greater certitude the same answers the tradition has always provided; on the other hand, however, new movements also arise from outside the existing traditions, offering new answers to the same questions. Because the existential questions are perennial and their solutions lie beyond rational determination, religious answers will always have a place in human experience. Hence religion as a whole is revived, and secularization is "self-limited." In fact, harking back to Sorokin, one might say that secularization is a healthy part of a cycle of religious growth and development. "The transcendent may no longer be coterminous with all human activity" (if ever it was), as Greeley (1969: 169) observes, "but the 'really real' will still persist where the core problems of interpretability are faced."

THE "RELIGION" OF SECULARIZATION

Max Weber's decision at the outset of his sociology of religion not to define "religion" is well known. So, too, is the definition of Émile Durkheim (1915), preeminently as it was refabricated at the hands of Talcott Parsons and his school of functionalism. Central to the Parsonian thrust was the integrationist or solidarity theme within the Durkheimian formulation; that is, that religion *unites all who adhere to it into a single moral community*. Religion was the glue of society, the source of social solidarity. So strongly believed was this proposition among social scientists that, in cases where it was manifestly clear that what participants in the action system termed "religion" did not integrate the social system, some sociologists nevertheless proceeded undaunted to search out the "real" religion of society — its latent source of solidarity — and proclaim this as sacred rite and ceremony. This approach enjoyed great success in the sociology of religion when applied in monopolistic settings (for example, the Marxist regimes of the Soviet Union or Chairman Mao's China), but encountered problems with pluralism (wherein, for instance, Babe Ruth's bat was proclaimed the "sacred object" of the United States' "national religion" [of baseball]).

What is wrong with this approach to religion? There are, first, a number of problems inherent in Durkheim's work itself. W.G. Runciman has summarized three of these, the most telling of which is that Durkheim's "explanation" of religious beliefs in a this-worldly terminus (society) does not actually "explain" them at all (except to explain them away): "Why, after all," Runciman (1970: 98) asks, "is the worship of society any more readily explicable than the worship of gods?" Intimately connected with this "explanation," however, is Durkheim's search for the source of social solidarity, and behind this is his *presumption* of solidarity. Although Durkheim is generally cited for "abolishing the role of individual judgment and subjective meaningfulness of social reality in his theory" (Sahay 1976: 167), in the concept of solidarity he reintroduces two types (mechanical and organic solidarity) of sociological "sticky stuff" (the glue that holds society together), that are *not* in fact structural but psychoemotional,

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though collective rather than individual. As Calvin Redekop (1967: 149) has observed, "the integrating power in society of religion" is *not* a social fact, but a largely unsubstantiated social-anthropological *belief* stemming from Durkheimian sources. This belief underlies the "religion" of secularization; that is, contemporary secularization theory is based on the view that religion is defined by this integrative function. Not only is the notion of solidarity as definitive of society now suspect (see Beyer 1989), but even if we do accept some concept of solidarity into our theoretical arsenal, there is no reason to presume an integrated wholeness that certainly is now difficult to see Ñ and may well have never existed.

Compounding these problems within Durkheim's theory is the problem of the translation of the title of Durkheim's central text in the sociology of religion into English as *The elementary forms of the religious life.*[7] The difficulty is with the French word *élémentaire*, a word that has a double connotation in French, but in English must be rendered as either "elementary" or "elemental." Joseph Ward Swain, the translator, chose the former. In so doing he gave a particularly *evolutionary* twist to Durkheim's work that was in the original, but was also balanced there by "elemental." This sense was the far more crucial contribution of Durkheim's research — namely, a study of "what pertains to or is one of the constituent parts or basic components . . . of humanity's religious life." Admittedly, Durkheim "did not wrestle with the fact that modern 'primitives' have just as many years of history behind them as do the rest of us to-day," but the use of "the *elementary* forms of religious life, in the sense of an early stage of development," was not the central thrust of Durkheim's work. The choice of "elementary" over "elemental" reflects "the far from insignificant fact that the translation was made at a phase in Western cultural evolution when sophisticated secular intellectuals tended to hold that chronologically early and in its wake present-day tribal religious life was closer, or more manageably close, to the truth about religion generically than our more developed forms" (Smith 1984: 28-29). In short, "elementary" was more consistent with the Great Transformation's incipient *doctrine of secularization* than was elemental. Rather than a paradigm study *of* religion, *The elementary forms* became a doctrinaire statement *about* religion.

That this is more than a semantic exercise may be seen quite clearly when we turn to Talcott Parsons's work as the major interpretive treatment on Durkheim in Western sociology for over a quarter of a century, for Parsons increasingly employed an evolutionary approach in his work over the years (e.g., 1977). Where did Parsons begin his evolutionary scheme but with Durkheim's (and others') descriptions of the Australian aborigines — a *contemporary* people?

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[7] The recent retranslation of Durkheim's text by Karen Fields under the title *The elementary forms of religious life* (Durkheim 1995) may help resolve this problem slightly for a future generation of scholars, but the historical problematic noted here is not altered thereby.

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As his work develops, he adds other contemporary accounts of "contemporary peoples, distributed over the earth's surface . . . rearranged to form a general *historical sequence* of societal evolution," while admitting that he is "able to say little about the detailed sequence of events in the course of which primitive societies begin their differentiation into more stratified societies" (Vidich and Lyman 1984: 78; cf., Kuper 1988). The point, however, that is easily lost in such an analysis is that it is for all practical purposes a *completely ahistorical* analysis. The Parsonian evolutionary scheme is *not* based upon a study of religious history but on the more-or-less contemporary religious lives of peoples throughout the world whose evolutionary "stage" has been determined by some *a priori* definition of development. "Secularization" feeds into this evolutionary structure as a "modern" entailment of universal developmental tendencies — although Parsons himself saw secularization far more positively than many subsequent secularization theorists.

Hadden quotes C. Wright Mills's (1959: 32-33) succinct critical summary of Parsons's theory: "Once the world was filled with the sacred — in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm." Although this statement implies historical description, it is in fact based on *almost no historical evidence*. Rather than systematic studies of the *past*, it draws from commonsense generalizations about history related to systematic studies of the present.

THE MYTH OF THE AGE OF FAITH

The underlying religious myth of secularization theory, as Stark notes, is that "in the past" people were significantly more religious than they are today. That is, that sometime, someplace in the past there was a solidary Age of Faith in which "the world was filled with the sacred." (People who accept this myth usually believe that the Age of Faith gave way to the Age of Reason.) Europeans and Euro-Americans often point to the Medieval era. Yet Dutch historian Peter Raedts maintains that there is a growing consensus that both the Catholic Middle Ages and the Age of Reformation are nineteenth-century creations. "A new era for Christianity in Europe began when after 1800 the churches gradually lost the support of the state and had to organize themselves. And it was not until then that the new mass media and the schooling of all the population made the christianization of everyone a reality" (Ruyter 1996: 7). In short, the Age of Faith myth reflects a particular educational process that did not begin to occur until about two hundred years ago. What happened in that process was that precisely as a serious attempt was made to "Christianize" the entire population, a counter attempt at resistance also emerged. The "Age of Faith," if it ever existed,

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did so for at most a few decades of the nineteenth century.

If we think only a little about the Medieval period, for example, we run into the contradictions of the putative Age of Faith. In this era, the monastic communities throughout Europe are adduced as evidence for this designation. Leaving aside for a moment the question of how "really religious" the motivations of those who entered these monastic communities actually were (or even whether or not people entered of their own free will), consider the paradox: monastic life is understood to be other-worldly asceticism, that is *withdrawal* from the *world*. If the Medieval world was so full of the sacred, why did people want to withdraw from it in such numbers? A better history, more attentive to popular religiosity (and lack thereof), would suggest that this was a "secular" world (as the term itself implies), not particularly any more or less "religious" than any other "world," and that this world — which more and more as it drew toward the Renaissance came to display what Agnes Heller (1981) has termed "practical atheism" (that is, less and less concern about the supernatural in day-to-day affairs) — slowly penetrated even the monastic foundations until it was hard in many cases to distinguish between the two. At this point the Reformation constituted a renewed demand for sacrality in all relationships — which was then itself undermined in due time, allowing Max Weber at the turn of the twentieth century to write *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, and Peter Berger (1967: 129) to say more concisely that "Christianity has been its own gravedigger."

Not clear either within the secularization account is the derivation of much scientific, medical, and agricultural history from the monasteries. The great geneticist Mendel, for example, was a monk, and some of the earliest experiments with electricity were conducted by the abbot and monks of the monastery of Nolet. Whence this interest, if these foundations were so unworldly? Monasteries also preserved not only "sacred" but secular texts as well. John Paterson (1982: 26) writes in his history of St. Brigid's Cathedral foundation at Kildare that "a scriptorium for the production of written books seems to have become active" as early as the seventh century, and "this would suggest that the monastery had become involved in secular affairs." Prior to the heavy hand of the Christian *reconquista* in Spain, Jews, Arabs, and Christians collaborated in the capital of Toledo translating important scientific texts from the ancient east. The monasteries were the essential repositories for the texts of Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosopher-scientists — so much so that the historical novelist Umberto Eco could frame his *The name of the rose* (1983) convincingly in such a setting.

PLURALISM

What can we say of secularization now? We can say that over time our epistemologies have changed, that our ideas of "the ways the world works" have

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changed, and that these have entailed corresponding shifts of emphasis in global explanatory structures or bases upon which we attribute credibility or truth. The Medieval worldview, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the era of modern science represent such alternative epistemologies. When we consider the relatively short history of the scientific worldview, it is not surprising that its epistemology has not fully jelled; furthermore, the phenomenon of globalization creates a contestation among religious epistemologies themselves that, though it has analogs in the past, is unprecedented in its scope today. Perhaps because he is now an American, it is Peter Berger (1992, 1996-1997, 1997) who, of the leading lights of secularization theory, has come fully to repudiate it.

The theory of secularization as a self-limiting process as proposed by Stark and Bainbridge, however, can help us to understand some of the important social dynamics that lie behind religious developments in our own day. In many respects, secularization theory was an attempt to account for how *pluralism* was reshaping the religious map — both geographically and cognitively; that is, there is a world religious ferment of contesting epistemologies that, though it is probably more immediately apparent to the average citizen of the West than to the average Middle Easterner, is in fact going on without limit around the globe. Contemporary pluralism means that far more religious worldviews are in immediate competition with each other than has ever been the case in the past. Whereas the United States could once settle on a shared "Judeo-Christian" ethic (see Silk 1984), its religious map now must accommodate Muslims and Buddhists in increasing numbers.

Furthermore, the nature of pluralism is multiplicative. Each "new" religion (or newly imported religion) spawns more new religions, and as some secularization theorists rightly noted, ever-increasing pluralism does undermine the element of absolute certainty that has been claimed by at least some religions, though new religions will simultaneously continue to arise making precisely this claim. That is, the more one becomes aware of more and more religions competing in a marketplace-like setting, the harder it becomes to assert that any one religion contains all truth and that others must be all wrong. While it is certainly possible to make "better" and "worse" type comparisons, all-or-nothing rigidity simply does not hold up.

In some respects, historically Islamic nations may be more sensitive to this than some of the liberal democracies of the West. As a result, these nations intentionally prohibit the " free commerce" of religion that has become a hallmark of Western democracy. Accounts of the Ayatollah Khomeini's program for Iran, for example, make it quite clear that he saw the Western presence, particularly exemplified by Americans, as a threat to the integrity of Islam. As a matter of fact, Pope Pius X attempted to sketch a similar program at the end of the nineteenth century when he issued a ruling, the apostolic letter *Testem benevolentiæ* (1899), that specifically condemned "Americanism." Because the

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Pope at that time lacked the political-economic resources at the disposal of the Ayatollah in the 1980s, however, his ruling could not have the dramatic impact that the actions of the Ayatollah did. Nevertheless, part of the prejudice that was directed against Roman Catholics in the United States for a considerable number of years must be seen in light of this document. Each case, like Communist ideology in the Soviet regimes, is an attempted monopoly of thought control — or the social condition of *monopolism*, the antithesis of pluralism.

Religious (or, more broadly, ideological) pluralism clearly creates a marketplace of ideas wherein absolute claims for ultimacy are always at some degree of risk (see Borhek and Curtis 1975). This gives rise to a model of religious competition or marketplace, and in a double sense. Not only is there competition among religions themselves, but there is also the freedom on the part of buyers (people) to pick and chose among the ideological wares that different religions proffer. This has been referred to as "religion *à la carte*" and the result as *bricolage* (e.g., Luckmann 1967; Bibby 1987). The outcome of increased competition is clearly shifting market shares. However, Finke and Stark (1988) have shown that the reality of increasing religious competition in American cities was not a decrease in religious mobilization but an increase. Stark (1992) has also shown that this increase extended to rural areas, but that these changes were often unreported as newer, "marginal" churches were not counted in religious censuses. European religious activity follows this pattern least well, perhaps because the state-church tradition there has created a mind-set to which any and all religion is simply a less desirable "good" than it is elsewhere, due to its having been taken for granted for so long, hence so closely identified with a taken-for-granted culture. With certain notable exceptions, European religious participation has been historically low; yet curiously, for example, European immigrants to the United States generally acted quickly to recreate the church of their homeland, and along with their immediate descendants were *much more* religious (or at least organizationally active) than was the custom in their countries of origin.

That people are more likely to want their religion à la carte does not necessarily mean that they are "less religious." The metaphor is helpful: first, people who order meals à la carte often actually spend more than they would have if they bought a *prix fixé* meal. Of course, choosing à la carte does mean that people do not simply take whatever is dished out to them. However, it should not be assumed that as a result they will eat irresponsibly — three desserts and no veggies. People may just as often use the carte to choose wisely, passing over rich sauces and heavy starches. Certainly it is true, as Chaves has noted, that the authority of religious officers is reduced in this process; on the other hand, it must be remembered that religious officers are nothing but lay folk who have become "hyped" on the religious message. The quality of motivation that leads to becoming a religious officer may change, but in fact this may again

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result in more rather than less: consider the surplus of (male and female, married and single, straight and gay) priests in the Episcopal Church, where being a bishop has been likened to shepherding a herd of cats, compared to the shortage of (celibate male) priests in the Roman Catholic church where hierarchical clerical authority is still maximized. Episcopal church membership has shrunk while its number of clergy has grown, whereas Roman Catholic membership has grown while its number of clergy has shrunk.

The numbers of options among which people may choose (or the degree of pluralism) obviously increases with globalization and with the advance of alternative knowledge paradigms. However, again, it is not the case that pluralism did not exist in the past. One may read, on the one hand, the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo in North Africa during the fifth century, and find that he tried out several belief systems before settling on Christianity. Indeed, the Roman world into which Christianity came was filled with competing ideological systems, wherein part of the putative uniqueness of Christianity was its claim to exclusivity. Studies by Nielsen (1990a, 1990b) of both the early Christian era and of the Inquisition show how much people were willing to suffer for persisting in holding alternative beliefs from the dominant tradition — first, Christianity versus the imperial cult; later, heterodox Christian beliefs versus the consolidated official church. Rodney Stark makes a similar point in the chapter on martyrdom in his *The rise of Christianity* (1996: 163-89).

With respect to the secularization thesis, then, two aspects of pluralism must be taken into consideration. On the one hand, there is a substantial body of evidence that pluralism of belief — including disbelief — has been an option throughout history that is simply intensified by globalization. On the other hand, pluralism forces us to make a distinction between secularization and what might be called "de-Christianization": that is, new religious movements may emerge or other world traditions may gain dominance over Christianity in the West.[8] Although we do not think this is likely to happen, it is sociologically important to understand that, if people cease to believe that Jesus Christ is God and instead believe that Saytha Sai Baba is God, no secularization has occurred. If Muslims in the United States outnumber Episcopalians (or even active members of the Church of England in England!), no secularization has occurred. *Religious change* of course has occurred, and this will have consequences for the societies in which it takes place. Rodney Stark suggests that we focus our work on religious change without the conceptual baggage of "secularization," whereas Karel Dobbelaere and others urge that there is something especially significant about religious change that sufficiently differentiates it from other forms of institutional change as to necessitate a unique conceptual framework.

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[8] Recently, the literature on the question of pluralism's effects on religion has mushroomed (cf., Christiano 1987: 118-49; Finke *et al.* 1996; Olson 1998; and Finke and Stark 1998, which contains a fairly thorough bibliography of work on the topic to date).

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An underlying assumption of secularization theory that pluralism thus challenges is the idea that "religion" is something fixed. Instead, sociologists of religion need to recognize the tentativeness and fragility of religious structures of meaning. Religious concepts easily lend themselves to reification. As ideational systems, religions are always in interaction with material culture, social structure, other cultural systems, and individual personalities. The theological bias of secularization theory within the sociology of religion has underwritten conceptions of "religion" as essentially fixed, rather than essentially variable. *Sociologically*, however, there is far more reason to conceive religion as variable — indeed, whereas among social institutions religion deals uniquely with a nonempirical, "uncontrollable" referent, religion is *infinitely* variable in a way that other action orientations are not. As Anthony Blasi has written (1990: 151): "The sociologist of religion needs to see this tentativeness, the casuist nature of much religious conduct, as a reality rather than attempt to explain the activity away as an unreflective outcome of predisposing factors and environmental influences." Only ecclesiological presuppositions and prejudices warrant the notion of religious fixity; thus analyses in the sociology of religion need to be attentive to change as *inherent* in religion, just as change is in other institutional spheres and cultural dimensions, precisely because religion is a sociocultural institution.

IMPLICIT RELIGION, SECULARIZATION, AND THE SACRED

To speak of "implicit religion" is to acknowledge that in the pluralistic culture of high-technology multinational capitalism (which some call postmodernity) the historical religions are less likely to carry the level of isomorphism between individual experience and larger cultural context that has been the case in the past, but simultaneously to recognize that the spiritual seeks coherence over time — objectifying thereby the subjective disposition toward ultimacy into an ultimate, or at least a potential ultimate, that becomes sacred. This sacred *always* reflects human experience precisely because it arises from human experience, and human experience is *always* and *everywhere*, to the extent that it is *human* experience, social. Hence the sacred *always* reflects the social, yet it is not the worship of the social, but rather the feeble simultaneous seeking-grasping of a transformation of present social relations that we can imagine, yet not realize.

In taking this approach, it seems to us that we are standing within "new paradigm" rather than "old paradigm" sociology of religion; that is, that our understanding of spirituality-religion-sacredness finds its root in the limitless dissatisfaction that is a species characteristic of *homo sapiens*. In other words, humans are never satisfied, or at least enough humans are never satisfied as to create social formations to increase satisfaction for themselves and others. We keep thinking we can do better. Religion is the institution of doing better *par*

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excellence. Sacred is the best you can get.

What has come to be called "secularization" is the process by which societies in the experience of "modernization" have created competing institutions for doing better. Pluralism is not only competition among multiple historic religious traditions, but it is also competition between historical religious approaches to doing better and other systems of doing better. People who say they "believe in education," for example, are making an implicitly religious statement, just as much as people who say they "believe in Christianity;" and — as Edward Bailey (1998: 18) points out — there are two "religious" concepts in each of these statements that need to be unpacked. People who "believe in" education or science may have lessened the apparent remoteness of their sacred, placing comparatively more control over outcomes at the human level, but note that their language is often similar. They "have faith" in our schools or in their doctors. They hope for a brighter future and so on. Peace, justice, even postage-stamp love emanate from these competing systems of ultimacy: "Ultimately" science or education will solve all our problems.

Rather than speak here of secularization, however, we should really recognize these expressions as manifestations of the "new religion" of Reason that emerged in the Enlightenment, which at least in its early forms identified rationality with Divinity — albeit the *deus absconditus* of Deism — and found in the pursuit of knowledge a spiritual quest. Max Weber in fact alluded to this in his remark about Robespierre as the apotheosis of "the charismatic of glorification of 'Reason'" (1978: 1209), and both Sartre (1955: 185-239) and Löwith (1949: 33-51) also pointed to it in their critiques of "dialectical materialism" — namely that the dialectic is a spiritual hope which must be accepted on faith, hence it contradicts the premises of materialism. Postmodernity, so called, is nothing more than the disenchantment of that sacrality the Enlightenment gave to Reason. It is the secularization of secularism (cf., Marsden 1994).

That we see a so-called "return to the sacred" or a resacralization or the rise of a new spirituality today suggests that these institutionalized alternatives that are the heirs of the Church of Reason are themselves not fulfilling the quest dynamic to which we have pointed within the human psyche. But, if one "believes in" the new paradigm, that dynamic will not go away, hence new sacred vistas will emerge and old sacred vistas will be revisited, but in a way that is relatively consistent with the sociocultural conditions imposed by high-technology multinational capitalism. This is not to say, however, that religion *reflects* (or is a "mere reflection of") sociocultural formations, but rather, that at its spiritual core in activating the sacred, the religio-social complex always seeks to overcome *specific* sociocultural formations (see Swatos and Gissurarson 1996: 233-37; Reeves 1990: 172-73).

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