CHAPTER IV
A SECULARIZATION PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGION

The relationship between religion and society is the chief interest of Sociology of Religion. The theoretical framework of secularization is a well-known interpretative design employed to decipher the status and role of religion in society. While Durkheimian thought in The Division of Labour in Society (1893) enshrined its possibilities, Weber's Sociology of Religion (1920) used it as such. Subsequent generation of sociologists picked it up especially after late 1950s. But there has been profound disagreement about almost everything - definition, existence, extent - of secularization. Its use in different disciplines such as philosophy, social sciences and theology is distinct. Even within social sciences, various levels of analyses of the religious situation result in different and divergent evaluations.

1. Etymology

The term secularization comes from the Latin saeculum, meaning an age (or era). By the fourth and fifth centuries, it denoted the world, probably as an extension of the idea of a “spirit of an age.” Also by that time, certain Christian formulae of prayer concluded with a phrase in Latin, saecula saeculorum, denoting unending time, and frequently rendered as “world without end” or “forever and ever.” Along similar lines, while priests confined to monasteries were referred to as “priests in enclosure,” the parish clergy who served the people “out in the world,” were called as “secular” clergy. It was also used to mean a life or life-style that is at odds with God. In 1851 George Jacob Holyoake coined the term ‘secularism’. He founded the Secular Society as a
group committed to a just world order and moral programme of individual action that would address human problems without the use of supernatural explanations.  

2. The Sacred and the Profane

Durkheim in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* defines religion in terms of the sacred. "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions - beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church." A basic distinction herein is between the sacred that includes all phenomena which are "set apart and forbidden," and the secular or the profane. "Sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which such prohibitions apply and which must keep their distance from what is sacred." The sacred is not defined by belief in gods or transcendent spirits. The notion of divinity is only a "secondary episode" in the history of religions. In fact there are religions such as Theravada Buddhism which do not have divinities. "But sacred things should not be taken to mean simply those personal beings we call gods or spirits. A rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in other words anything at all, can be sacred." This distinction does not even necessarily correspond

---


159 *ibid.*, p. 40.

160 *ibid.*, p. 36.
to the distinction between good and evil, i.e. sacred is not equal to good, and profane is not the same as evil. There may even be sacred things which are harmful, and evil things which are advantageous to man and society. The list of sacred objects cannot be fixed once and for all; it varies from religion to religion. Nevertheless, the sacred and the profane have been conceived by the human mind as two absolutely distinct classes, much more distinct than the good and the bad. But Durkheim also admits that they can pass to and fro between them: the profane may become sacred by means of rituals, and the sacred may become profane through erosion of values or dislocation of the deities.\(^{161}\) The erosion or disappearance of one set of the sacred is invariably followed by the appearance of new entities or states to which the sacred status is granted.

Sacralisation and profanation occur when a person or a thing is touched by a diffuse and disengaged societal force. Religion, in its essence, is a society’s classification of some things as sacred (beyond the rule of interest and reason) and of other things as profane.\(^{162}\) The essence of religion is the community of believers, the indispensable feeling of collective oneness in worship and faith. “But wherever we observe religious life, its foundation is a defined group.”\(^ {163}\) Religion is not a primary or absolute force. Nisbet interprets Durkheim thus,

\[\text{Religion, to be sure, is not, for Durkheim, a primary or absolute force. Society alone has the metaphysical attributes of absoluteness and omnipotence in explanations of man's conduct}\]

\(^{161}\)Ibid., pp. 37-8.


\(^{163}\)Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 43.
and thought. If religion exerts directive force on the mind, it is only because it is an especially intense manifestation of the collective mind... The authority of religion is, basically, the authority of society, but it is given an intensity that no other aspect of social life reveals... Religion is society, but it is a focus of those aspects of society which are endowed with sacredness.\textsuperscript{164}

Parsons explicitates that in Durkheimian thought it is not intrinsic properties of things themselves that make them sacred or profane, but human attitudes towards them. Furthermore, sacred things are not treated in a utilitarian manner. "The attitude of calculation of utility is the antithesis of the respect for sacred objects... Thus sacred things, precisely in excluding this utilitarian relationship, are hedged with taboos and restrictions of all sorts. Religion has to do with sacred things."\textsuperscript{165}

Howard Becker supplements Durkheimian thought with two insights. Firstly, Becker specifies that religion does not exhaust the sacred. The latter is bigger than the former. "Religion per se is but one aspect of the sacred. A very large amount of sacred conduct has little or nothing to do with the supernaturalistically oriented - which is to say, with the religious." Secondly, he adds that "Whether sacred or secular, all values are culturally defined in some manner and degree." According to him, a major task is to construct a sacred-secular continuum along which evaluations can be ranged.\textsuperscript{166} The difficulty in ascertaining the sacred and the profane is noted by Donald A. Nielsen. "The

\textsuperscript{164}Nisbet, \textit{Emilie Durkheim: Makers of Modern Science}, p. 78.


distinctive feature of the 'primitive' sacred - sharp separation from the profane
enforced by powerful interdictions - is transformed in modern society. The
barrier between sacred and profane is breached. The latter are often
emphasized (i.e. decline of the sacred), but we must also note the former. Such
sacralizations make it difficult to unambiguously identify the 'sacred' as a distinct
category.\textsuperscript{167} As there is some ambivalence that envelops the sacred, the
nomination and legitimization of the sacred in any society is often done by the
most powerful group, represented by a group of specialists. "The attitude
towards the sacred which is defined as legitimate is determined by the social
group dominant in a society, that is the group which has succeeded in giving its
aims priority in the society."\textsuperscript{168}

Religious practices or rites are central to Durkheim's conception of
religion and the social genesis and reproduction of the sacred. He defines them
as "rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred
things."\textsuperscript{169} According to him, it is cults that enable believers to live and to act.

In fact, anyone who has really practised a religion knows very well that
it is the cult that evokes these impressions of joy, of inner peace, of
serenity, of enthusiasm, which the faithful hold as the experimental proof
of their beliefs. The cult is not simply a system of signs by which faith is
expressed outwardly, it is a collection of means by which it is created and
periodically recreates itself. Whether it consists of physical manoeuvres
or mental operations, it is always the cult that is efficacious.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{167}Donald A. Nielsen, "Durkheim's Religious Sociology," Richard K. Fenn (ed.), Blackwell
\textsuperscript{168}Jean Remy and Emile Servais, "The Functions of the Occult and the Mysterious in
\textsuperscript{169}Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, p. 40
\textsuperscript{170}Ibid., p. 312.
Thus cults are cellular to religion and constitutive to society in as much as society would weaken without it. Even the gods would die if cults were not celebrated.\textsuperscript{171} Of the two aspects of cult, the negative cult frees man from the possible contamination by the profane, and the positive cult effects a relationship between god and man.\textsuperscript{172}

The Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane has been questioned. Evans-Pritchard doubts it. "Surely what he calls 'sacred' and 'profane' are on the same level of experience, and, far from being cut off from one another, they are so closely intermingled as to be inseparable. They cannot, therefore, either for the individual or for social activities, be put into closed departments which negate each, one of which is left on entering the other... I have never found that the dichotomy of sacred and profane was of much use for either purpose."\textsuperscript{173} Bennetta Jules-Rosette alerts on the imposition of American and European conceptual frames of the sharp distinction between the sacred and secular on the African context, and calls for a fresh interpretation.\textsuperscript{174} Berger too hints at the variance in the western and eastern understanding of secularity.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., pp. 256-7.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., p. 243.
3. The Concept and Extent of Secularization

There is passionate disagreement among sociologists about the concept and extent of secularization. "Religion has become more interesting to social scientists in the past decade or so, but not all are agreed about the meaning of the changes observed in religions." According to Demerath, "Perhaps there was once a time when scholars of religion could assume a consensus on what constituted religion. If so, that time is long gone. Not only there are widening differences between religion, spirituality, and the sacred, but there are whole analytic traditions devoted to sectarian religion, churchly religion, and civil religion, not to mention that triumph of euphemism over cultic substance: 'new religious movements.' Those with functionalist definitions of religion tend to deny secularization, while those with substantive definitions are likely to admit it. Those who admit large scale secularization may have, to some extent at least, unrealistic conceptions about a foregone golden era of religion or religiosity. Those who reject it altogether may have broad and inclusive definitions of religion.

---


In an attempt to make sense of the muddled concept of secularization, we may begin with the six meanings or uses of the term compiled by Shiner. The first refers to the decline of religion whereby previously accepted religious symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and significance culminating in a society without religion. The second refers to greater dissociation from the supernatural, and conformity with the exigencies of this world. The third means the disengagement of society from religion, i.e. isolation of religion from society. The fourth denotes transposition of religious beliefs and institutions into non-religious forms - a kind of anthropologised religion. The fifth is desacralisation of the world - man and nature become the object of rational-causal explanation and manipulation in which the supernatural plays no part. Finally, secularisation can mean a movement from a 'sacred' to a 'secular' society in the sense of abandonment of any commitment to traditional values and practices, the acceptance of change and the founding of all decisions and actions on a rational and utilitarian basis. Clearly these six meanings are by no means mutually exclusive.

Several descriptions of secularization encompass a historical development by which religion has lost (or is losing) a presumed central place in society at macro and micro levels. The collapse of religion had been predicted by several theorists - Tylor, Frazer, Marx, and later Freud - of the age of Enlightenment. While Woolston held that Christianity would disappear by

---


1900, Voltaire ventured his guess to be at 1810. The later prophets too were sure of the end of religion, but not of the date. According to Anthony F.C. Wallace, extinction of religion is an inevitable part of the course of evolution.  

Presenting several signs of secularization today such as decline in faith, Church membership, attendance in Sunday schools and number of full-time professionals, Bruce concludes, "Taken in isolation, none of the data presented above would be compelling. Any one index is unreliable... But what makes the data presented above compelling is their cumulative effect. All of them point the same way - towards increasing secularization - and they have consistently pointed that way for between 50 and 100 years, depending on the index in question."

Those of functional perspective foresee the disappearance of religion in its familiar and traditional forms, but replaced by something based upon non-supernaturalistic and non-transcendental foundations. Comte sought to establish a new religion of Humanity, and Durkheim identified social power with the sacred. "Every day, every week, every month, every quarter, the most widely read journals seem just now to vie with each other in telling us that the time for religion is past, that faith is a hallucination or an infantile disease, that the gods have at last been found out and exploded." But according to Fujio Ikado, "The assertion that secularization means religious decline seems to be

---


based on statistical and apparent phenomena such as decrease of the number of members of particular religious groups (religious communities and religious voluntary associations), or the disappearance of certain religious customs. The view of religion implicit in that argument is that of a primitive or peasant society where the society itself is a religious community, not yet functionally differentiated from law and politics.\textsuperscript{185}

Another interpretation of secularization is as institutional differentiation, described by some as structural differentiation, i.e. the fragmentation of social life due to the creation of specialized roles and institutions to handle specific features or functions previously carried out by one role or institution. Specialization increased secularization as many social sectors that were ruled by religion were taken over by specialized agents.\textsuperscript{186} Dobbelaere sees such a secularization as part of the entire social evolution, not confined only to religion. "Secularization is not a causal concept, it describes the consequences of functional differentiation for the religious subsystem and expresses the interpretation of this experience by the religious staff. ... Secularization is only the particularization of the general process of functional differentiation in the religious subsystem."\textsuperscript{187} He defines secularization as "a process by which the overarching and transcendent religious system of old is being reduced in a


\textsuperscript{187}Karel Dobbelaere, "Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization," \textit{Sociology of Religion} 60. 3 (Fall, 1999), p. 231.
modern functionally differentiated society to a subsystem along with other subsystems, losing in this process its overarching claims over other subsystems.\footnote{\textsuperscript{188}}

Societalization is yet another understanding of secularization. Wilson describes it as the process by which “life is increasingly enmeshed and organized, not locally but societally (that society being most evidently, but not uniquely, the nation state.)”\footnote{\textsuperscript{189}} In this process, close-knit, integrated communities lose their power and presence to large-scale industrial and commercial enterprises, to modern states coordinated through massive, impersonal bureaucracies, and to cities. According to him, in the global process of secularization, “the notion of a world order created by some supernatural agency has given considerable place to an understanding of a man-made and man-centred world.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{190}} He defines secularisation as “the process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{191}} In the meanwhile religion that had accommodated its calendar of activities to the temporal events in local community loses its points of contact with the people.

Privatization is the process by which certain differentiated institutional spheres (religion, family, leisure, the arts) are segregated from the dominant

\footnote{\textsuperscript{188}}{ibid., p. 232.}


institutions of the public sphere (e.g., economic, political, legal) and relegated to the private sphere.\textsuperscript{192} Associated with it is individuation, the process by which the individual and his or her concerns come to be seen as distinct from the social group and its concerns.\textsuperscript{193} Herein religion has increasingly to do with individuals than the society at large. The decline is in the public role of religion. The functionalists such as Durkheim had found the task of religion to be integration of society. But in the wake of secularization "the world-building potency of religion is thus restricted to the construction of sub-worlds, of fragmented universe of meaning, the plausibility structure of which may in some cases be no larger than the nuclear family."\textsuperscript{194}

On the micro-level, secularization has been ascertained as decline also in individual religious belief. Berger describes secularisation as, the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the dominations of religious institutions and symbols... secularisation is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious content in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous thoroughly secular perspective on the world. Moreover, it is implied here that the process of secularization has a subjective side as well. As there is secularisation of society and culture, so is there a secularisation of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations.\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{192} McGuire, Religion: The Social Context, p. 264.


\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., pp. 107-8.
Stark posits that it is the slackening of personal piety that the prophets of secularization have stressed from the start. He asserts, "... the prophets of secularization have stressed personal piety, and to the extent that they expressed macro interests it has been to claim that they are so linked that a decline in one necessitates a decline in the other. Thus, if the churches lose power, personal piety will fade; if personal piety fades, the churches will lose power."\(^\text{196}\)

Several reasons have been attributed for secularization. In Weberian sociology, particularly of religion, rationalization is a significant reason.\(^\text{197}\) In *The Social Psychology of the World Religions*, Weber admits that the process takes “unusually varied forms.” He speaks of rationalism as involving “an increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts,” but points out that it can also mean “the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means” or simply “systematic arrangement.”\(^\text{198}\) Rationalism has been described as “an attempt to replace the supernatural thinking with naturalistic thinking, maintaining that reason is the only valid


\(^{197}\) Karlberg identifies four types of rationality in Weber's work: practical rationality that views and judges the worldly activity in relation to the individual's purely pragmatic and egoistic interests; theoretical rationality that involves an effort to master reality through increasingly abstract concepts rather than through action; substantive rationality that directly orders action into patterns through clusters of values, i.e. it involves a choice of means to ends within the context of a system of values; and finally formal rationality which involves means-ends calculation with reference to “universally applied rules, laws and regulations.” Cf. Stephen Karlberg, “Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980), pp. 1145-1179.

source of knowledge about the world."^199 As a result, religious authority that enjoyed almost monopoly in the past loses credibility, and turns out at most to be one of the competing claims to authority. A clear indication is, "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."^200

A feature of rationalization that undermines the individual's personal sense of meaning and belonging, according to Weber, is disenchantment of the world, i.e. the process by which things held in awe or reverence are stripped of their special qualities and become ordinary. According to Swatos, "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."^201 For example, many items of reverence (candles, blessed water, oil) upheld by Catholicism were desacralized by Protestantism.^202 The factors behind rationalization may be internal or external to religion. While Wilson stresses the external factors, the chief one being the application of scientific method or approach to society, according to Weber, internal factors

---


^201 Ibid.

lead to rationalization, the culmination being Calvinistic Protestantism. Berger does not ignore the internal factors. When certain external factors appear, the internal conditions make the religion vulnerable to secularization. The West, Weber believed, was more rational in its approach to all spheres of life and endeavour - the development of the scientific outlook, the systematic pursuit of scientific knowledge and its application through technology, rational bureaucratic organization of administration and production. But thereby he does not conclude the supercrity of the West.

Weber sees religious development in terms of ethical rationalisation. Increasing social complexity demands more laws and procedures. Such a need is met by the emergence of professional priesthood. Unlike magicians concerned with achieving concrete material results for clients, the concern of priests is with intellectual matters and with the elaboration of doctrine which generally involves the development of ethical thought. Specifically, the professionally trained priesthood is the carrier and the expeditor of rationalization. "The full development of both a metaphysical rationalization and a religious ethic is a consequence of an independent and professionally trained priesthood, occupied with continuous activity of the cult and the practical need of the cure of souls."

---


Modernization, industrialization, and urbanization are seen by some as reasons for secularization. Modernisation is the overall social process, including industrialisation, by which previously agrarian, historical and contemporary societies become developed.²⁰⁶ Secularization is a consequence of the complex social changes that have occurred as a result of, which are associated with, or, indeed, which have contributed to, the process of industrialisation and urbanisation. The correlation between secularisation and industrialisation is not perfect. It is not absolute that the more industrialised a nation is, the more secularised it is.²⁰⁷ It is estimated that while the correlation is better with regard to Europe, it is less verified in context of the United States.²⁰⁶

According to David Martin, religious pluralism - a societal situation in which no single religion holds monopoly - is another factor that is related to secularization.²⁰⁸ The exposure to complementary or rival religious interpretations, and the possibility of choosing from varied religious organizations lead to the devaluation or loss of authority for religious view in general.²¹⁰

---


²⁰⁷ Cf. Hamilton, The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives, p. 170. Mary Douglas vehemently denounces the tendency to associate secularization with modernity. “The idea that primitive man is by nature deeply religious is nonsense. The truth is that all the varieties of scepticism, materialism and spiritual fervour are to be found in the range of tribal societies... Secularism is not essentially a product of the city. There are secular tribal cultures.” Cf. Mary Douglas, Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (New York: Random House, 1970). p. x


The decline of religion has not been universally accepted. Several sociologists compete with one another to point out convincing signs of the status of religion today. As the estimates are dependent on specific definitions of secularization, claims and counterclaims are commonplace. Stark denounces the myths of religious decline and a bygone age of faith. He evaluates many current statistics, and concludes, "After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper requiescat in pace." From the perspective of Globalization, Beyer opines that "Few observers anywhere are willing to defend the hypothesis that, globally speaking, we live today in a secularized society in that sense." Peter Berger corrects himself to assert, "I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake ... Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It's very religious." Grace Davie observes that:

It is true that the traditional disciplines of the Christian churches may be breaking down, but not in favour of the secular. The movement, rather, is towards new (much less controllable) expressions of Christianity and emergent hybrids, notably in Latin America, where an individual may be one thing in the morning (a Christian denomination) and quite another (not least an Afro-Brazilian variant) in the afternoon. Add to this already extensive

212 Ibid., p. 270
list the parts of the world dominated by other world faiths -- the hugely varied Islamic nations, the competing religious traditions of the Middle East, the Sikhs and Hindus of the Indian sub-continent and the great diversity of Eastern religions -- and Berger's claim that the developing world is "as furiously religious as ever" seems well justified.  

Differences among sociologists on the extent of secularization is to an extent traceable also to the difficulty in measuring the process reliably. It is contested whether differentiation of social realms such as religion, politics, economics, and education is favourable or unfavourable to secularization. At a time when religion served as the integrating force of society, religion was coupled with several structures. Prof. Oommen observes, differentiation has not been equally acceptable to all religious communities.

In the Christian West structural differentiation and progressive autonomization of different dimensions of society have been accepted as 'progress' and the route to modernization... At present a 'good society' is conceived as one in which independent spaces are available to the state, civil society and market... As for Islam and Sikhism, this differentiation is not even accepted in principle. In the case of Hinduism and Buddhism the position is ambiguous, and in the case of Confucianism some interpreters tend to focus on discipline rather than on rights, on loyalty rather than on entitlement.

Similarly, is religious pluralization a conclusive indicator of secularization? In pluralization, while new religious movements tend to challenge and displace older ones, religion itself is not thwarted. Competition among religions offers wider choice to people. The reality of increasing religious

---


competition in American cities was not a decrease in religious mobilization but an increase.\textsuperscript{217}

The emergence of New Religious Movements (NRM) is reckoned varyingly as promoting or demoting secularization. In a context of the disintegration of the "Christian collective consciousness" of the West, an undermining of its objectivity by pluralism, and the perception of the useless character of Christian religions on the societal level, some exotic religions have showed up.\textsuperscript{218} Luckmann, however, underscores that these NRMs have a mundane orientation, that is, unlike the historical religions that were rather transcendent in their approach, the NRMs appear to reach only the level of "intermediate transcendence."\textsuperscript{219} According to Stark and Bainbridge, secularization is a natural, self-limiting process. When religion in a bid to promote itself welcomes more worldliness, it engenders the rise of revived or new religious groups and movements.\textsuperscript{220}

Similarly it is debatable whether even attendance at church services is a conclusive indicator for or against secularization. Dobbelaeere affirms that secularization is a societal process, and so explanation of individual behaviour


\textsuperscript{218}Dobbelaeere, "Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization," p. 235.


may not be reduced to a simple direct effect of secularization. The proposition becomes more intricate in the context of the phenomenon of the rise of "cultural religion" and cultural laïcité (cultural secularization). Grace Davie diagnoses the predicament of religion in Britain since in 1945 as that of "believing without belonging."

In the context of pluralization and New Religious Movements, sociologists do feel the need for an agent of integration. Martin suggests "a national myth which represents a common denominator of all faiths: one nation under God." Parsons and Bellah propose a civil religion to harmonise conventional

---

221 Dobbeiaere, "Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization," p. 236.

222 Cultural religion denotes "a way of being religiously connected without being religiously active. It is a recognition of a religious community but with a lapsed commitment to the core practices around which the community originally formed. It is a tribute to the religious past that offers little confidence for the religious future." Cf. Demerath, "The Rise of 'Cultural Religion' in European Christianity: Learning from Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden," p. 136.

223 A cultural laïcité is defined by the following characteristics: the state and public authorities remain neutral in religious matters, freedom of religion is recognized (including the freedom not to believe in any religion), the autonomy of individual conscience is recognized (personal freedom of men and women from all religious and philosophical powers), critical reflection is applied in all fields (religion, politics, science, etc.). Cf. Jean-Paul Willaime, "Religious and Secular France Between Northern and Southern Europe," Social Compass 45, 1 (1988), pp. 167-8.


227 Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion." Cf. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," Robert N. Bellah (ed.), Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional World (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 171.
religions by generalizing the different notions of God. It sacralizes its prophets, martyrs, and historical places: it has its ritualistic expressions and may also use certain sacred or secular archetypes or myths.²²⁸ Quite different from Bellah who sees the integrative role played by civil religion in America, Cha studies the concept as a category to explain the fundamental social conflicts or confrontations in modern Korean society. The attempt is to offer a socio-religious explanation of the civil religious mechanism in Korean society, beyond the many and varied institutionalized religions.²²⁹

Davie holds that the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is to America what secularization theory is to Europe. The former is based on the metaphysical need of human beings for religion, i.e. being ‘religious’ is part of the human condition. To meet this need the monopolistic religious ambience of Europe offers few alternatives: in America several contesters show up, though no compensator will suffice for religion. Secularization in Europe is caused by deficiency in supply of alternatives to religious institutions, not due to lack of demand. “To move forward we will have to take religion seriously and to be flexible in our approach.”²³⁰ Once again religion will be enthroned, chiefly through innovative ventures than the revival of the old.²³¹

Changes have taken place in public “uses” of religion, regardless of the extent of secularization. No sociologist sensibly maintains that religion always has the same status and role. A whole group of sociologists of religion brought together by Richard K. Fenn in Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion agrees that institutionalized religion has lost its monopoly on the sacred, instead, several sectors of the modern world have taken over many functions of religious institutions and developed their own sources of inspiration and authority. While admitting that due to the process of secularization, the sacred becomes dispersed and unfocused, these authors call for redefinition of religion or at least imagination of it in new ways. James Beckford observes that religion is not necessarily withering away, for there is undeniable evidence of vitality in many religious organizations, vigour in the spiritual lives and religious experience of some people, and strength in the attachment to collective religious identities in some places. From a permanent resource providing identity, meaning, inspiration, and consolation to a very large number of people, religion has become available for use in a bewildering variety of ways. It increasingly serves as a resource to which individuals and groups have recourse from time to time. Hervieu-Léger, perceiving the social scenario of recent times, is very optimistic about the role of religion in modern society, but admits the need for restructuring religion.

---


4. Secularization of Kerala

The analysis of the process of secularization has not led us a conclusive definition as there is yet no last word on the subject. Nevertheless, it has been put to use in the study of the Kerala society. According to M.N. Srinivas, secularisation in India has been subsumed under the Westernisation. George Mathew in Communal Road to a Secular Kerala, basing himself on data gathered from the social history of Travancore, studies the social processes of secularisation and communalization. He argues that the two processes at once strengthened secular trends as well as mobilized the people on communal lines. The study shows that secularising process retained, perhaps sustained, the primordial elements (such as kinship, caste, tribe, religion) in individual and collective terms; nay, these were used as instruments of change towards a secular society. In the process, a change comes about in the function of primordiality. Religious identity was used as an instrument to realize citizenship with a new content - social equality, economic opportunity, civil rights. Religion helped the process of secularisation to begin in a big way.

Kuriedath while examining the role of the Catholic community in the communalization and secularization of the Kerala society, doubts whether the position of George Mathew is that of co-existence or displacement. Kuriedath argues that the very process of communalization, by its inner dynamics, finally

---


236 A princely state that along with Kochi, and the Malabar Province, were unified to form the State of Kerala in 1956.

leads to secularization. He holds that probably Kerala witnessed such an intense and early process of communalization chiefly because it has a very influential Christian community with sufficient organizational backing, and open to the impact of secular ideas.238

5. Secularization: Relevance for Research

Controversies about the concept of secularization have given rise to fierce debates about its appropriateness for sociological purposes. Evolution or even change in its estimate by certain sociologists makes it still more enigmatic.239 There have been sociologists who consider it too imprecise, broad and insufficient for any objective research and analysis. Others find it too restricted to be of help in interpreting the very complex nature of social change.

The concept of secularization itself is not very useful because it typically implies a unilinear historical development - inevitable decline of religion and/or religiosity ... Religion is thoroughly embedded in so many facets of society that unilinear interpretations cannot possibly portray the complex ways religion reciprocally influences society. Often the empirical data used to buttress the secularization interpretation are based on narrow, substantive definitions of religion that cannot encompass new forms that religion might take.240

Sociologists such David Martin241 and Shiner242 called for its total abandonment, as it serves only ideological and polemical, rather than theoretical

---


functions. Hadden traces the weakness of secularization theory in both its genesis and its predicted outcomes. He asserts that 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." With the passage of time it has in social sciences become a concept more sacralized than tested. Swatos raises the question whether it is "an analytic tool or a value judgement?" Dobelaere calls secularization a theoretical framework, and not a paradigm. Joan Brothers holds that there are three main grounds from which criticism of the sociological uses of the concept of secularization and its value in understanding the occurrences in the world can be initiated. These assumptions are:

i) That it is possible to demarcate clearly the territory of the sacred and the profane.

ii) That primitive cultures tend to be religious while industrialized cultures tend to be secularized.

iii) That religious experience is identified with participation in institutionalized religion.

--


246 Brothers, Religious Institutions, pp. 49-50.
In spite of these critical observations, the popularity of the perspective of secularization in researches has advanced. It is in circulation even today.\textsuperscript{247} It cannot be denied that ambiguity has arisen partly due to the bias of some towards the status of religion today. Greeley decries the profoundly anti-intellectual, even "learned repugnance" to evidence that religion is not disappearing from the human condition. It is this unscientific bias towards secularization that invigorates him to call for the abandoning of the very concept of "secularization" itself.\textsuperscript{248} He would tend to the extend of saying that the metaphysical constitution of humans, endowed with life and hope, makes them not susceptible to secularization. "In the final analysis, then, 'secularization' is neither a descriptive nor a predictive model. It is normative. It is neither an account of the way things are nor a prediction of the way things are likely to become. Rather, it is a prescription of the way reality should be. 'Secularization' is occurring because it \textit{should} be occurring... 'Secularization' is not scholarship; it is the religious faith of the secularized."\textsuperscript{249}

Welcoming or deploring the process of secularization is irrelevant to sociology. "It is possible, actually without too great an effort, to describe the empirical phenomenon without taking up an evaluative stance."\textsuperscript{250} The concept can be used effectively for social analysis, if it is conceived of openly, and a basic conceptual clarity is first sought for. According to Beyer, "the

\textsuperscript{247} \textit{Doctrine and Life}, 50, 10 (December, 2000).


\textsuperscript{249} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{250} Berger, \textit{The Sacred Canopy}, p. 107.
secularisation thesis explains why and how religion as an arena of human endeavor faces peculiar challenges in contemporary global society; it cannot, however, predict how the observable responses in the religious domain will fare, simply because at the macrosocial level there are too many variables at play."²⁵¹ Taking note of its diverse understandings and other limitations, it may be profitably used as a matrix to comprehend the reality of religion today. According to Hanegraaff, secularization "can very well be understood as a thorough transformation of religion under the impact of historical and social processes, particularly since the 18th century... Secularization by no means implies that religion declines or that religions die out; but it does mean that religion is transformed in a crucial way."²⁵² Though noted by Durkheim himself, the scarcity of studies²⁵³ about sacralization, the process counter to secularization or profanation, leaves room for its useful deployment.

