RELIGION, SECULARIZATION, AND SACRALIZATION

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Much of the difficulty in analyzing processes of secularization, religious transformation and sacralization in our global age derives from the tendency to use the dichotomous analytical categories sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, and religious/secular, as if they would be synonymous and interchangeable, when in fact they correspond to historically distinctive, somewhat overlapping but not synonymous or equivalent social systems of classification. The sacred tends to be immanent in pre-axial societies, transcendence is not necessarily religious in some axial civilizations, and obviously some secular reality (the nation, citizenship, the individual, inalienable rights to life and freedom) can be sacred in the modern secular age.

Sacred and profane, following Durkheim, should be viewed as a general dichotomous classificatory scheme of all reality, characteristic of all pre-axial human societies, encompassing within one single order what later will be distinguished as three separate realms: the cosmic, the social and the moral. All reality, what we later will learn to distinguish as the gods or spirits, nature and cosmic forces, humans and other animal species, and the political, social, and moral orders are integrated into a single order of things according precisely to the dichotomous classificatory system of sacred and profane. The entire system, moreover, is an immanent “this worldly” one, if one is allowed to use anachronistically another dichotomous classificatory category that will only emerge precisely with the axial revolutions.

What defines the axial revolutions is precisely the introduction of a new classificatory scheme that results from the emergence of “transcendence”, of an order, principle, or being, beyond this worldly reality, which now can serve as a transcendent principle to evaluate, regulate, and possibly transform this worldly reality. As in the case of the Platonic world of “ideas”, or the Confucian reformulation of the Chinese tao, transcendence is not necessarily “religious,” nor does all “religion” need to become transcendent, if we are allowed once again to use anachronistically another dichotomous classificatory category, “religious/secular” that will first emerge within Medieval Christendom and will later expand into a central dynamic of secular modernity.
All axial revolutions introduce some form of transcendent path, individual and collective, of salvation, redemption, or moral perfection “beyond human flourishing”. However, not all axial paths entail some kind of refashioning or transformation of the world or the social order. In some cases, as in Buddhism, this transcendent path may entail a radical devaluation and rejection of all reality and a flight from this world, as analyzed by Max Weber. But, according to Charles Taylor’s analysis, all of them entail some refashioning of “the self”, who is now “called” to live (or precisely to deny herself) according to some transcendent norm beyond human flourishing. In the case of the radical transcendent monotheism introduced by the prophets in Ancient Israel, the axial revolution entails a de-sacralization of all cosmic, natural, and social reality, of all creatures, gods and idols for the sake of the exclusive sacralization of Yahweh, the transcendent creator God.

1. **Western Christian Secularization**

Within this perspective, the religious/secular dichotomy is a particular medieval Christian version of the more general axial dichotomous classification of transcendent and immanent orders of reality. Unique to the medieval system of Latin Christendom is the institutionalization of an ecclesiastical-sacramental system of mediation, the Church, between the transcendent Civitas Dei and the immanent Civitas hominis, St. Agustin’s well-known radical formulation of the irremediable chasm between two worlds that is common to most axial civilizations. The church can play this mediating role precisely because it partakes of both realities. As *Ecclesia invisibilis*, “the communion of the saints”, the Christian church is an “spiritual” reality, part of the eternal transcendent City of God. As *Ecclesia visibilis*, the Christian church is in the *saeculum*, a “temporal” reality and thus part of the immanent city of man.

The modern Western process of secularization is a particular historical dynamic that only makes sense as a response and reaction to this particular medieval Latin Christian system of classification of all reality into “spiritual” and “temporal”, “religious” and “secular.” The term secularization, in this respect, derives from a unique Western Christian theological category, that of the *saeculum*, which has no equivalent term not only in other world religions, but even in Eastern Christianity.
As Charles Taylor has clearly shown, the historical process of modern secularization begins as a process of internal secular reform within Latin Christendom, as an attempt to “spiritualize” the temporal and to bring the religious life of perfection out of the monasteries into the saeculum, thus literally, as an attempt to secularize the religious. The process of spiritualization of temporal-secular reality entails also a process of interiorization of religion, and thus a certain de-ritualization, de-sacralization or de-magicization of religion, which in the particular case of Christianity takes naturally the form of de-sacramentalization and de-ecclesialization of religion. The repeated attempts at Christian reform of the saeculum began with the papal revolution and continued with the emergence of the spiritual orders of mendicant and preaching friars bent on Christianizing the growing medieval towns and cities and with the emergence of lay Christian communities of brothers and sisters, committed to a life of Christian perfection in the saeculum, in the world. These medieval movements of Christian reform already established the basic patterns of secularization which will be later radicalized by the accumulative processes of secularization brought first by the Protestant Reformation and then, from the French Revolution on, by all subsequent modern civilizing and reform processes.

It is important to realize, therefore, that the historical process of Western secularization begins as a process of internal religious reform within Medieval Christianity. But this historical process of secularization becomes radicalized later, first by the Protestant Reformation and then by the French Revolution. The process of religious reform of the Protestant Reformation, as well as the processes of secular/laicist reform initiated by the French Revolution, both are explicitly directed against Catholicism and against the ecclesiastical structures of mediation between transcendent and immanent, spiritual and secular/temporal reality, which the Catholic Church claimed as its exclusive institutional monopoly. In different ways both paths lead to an overcoming of the medieval Catholic dualism by a positive affirmation and revaluation of the saeculum, that is, of the secular age and the secular world, imbuing the saeculum with a quasi-transcendent meaning as the place for human flourishing.

The Protestant path, which will attain its paradigmatic manifestation in the Anglo-Saxon Calvinist cultural area, particularly in the United States, is characterized by a blurring of the boundaries and by a mutual reciprocal infusion of the religious and the secular, in a sense making the religious secular and the secular religious. It takes also a
form of radical de-sacramentalization which will assume an extreme form with the radical sects in their attempt to dismantle all ecclesiastical institutions and to turn the ecclesia into a merely secular association of visible “saints”. This Anglo-Saxon pattern of secularization does not entail necessarily the decline of religion. On the contrary, as the history of the United States clearly shows, from the American Revolution till the present processes of radical social change and secular modernization have often been accompanied by “great awakenings” and by religious growth.

The French-Latin-Catholic path, by contrast, will take the form of laicization, and is basically marked by a civil-ecclesiastical, and laic-clerical antagonistic dynamic. This explains the central role of anticlericalism in the Catholic pattern. Unlike in the Protestant pattern, here the boundaries between the religious and the secular are rigidly maintained, but those boundaries are pushed into the margins, aiming to contain, privatize and marginalize everything religious, while excluding it from any visible presence in the secular public sphere. When the secularization of monasteries takes place first during the French Revolution and later in subsequent liberal revolutions, the explicit purpose of breaking the monastery walls, is not to bring the religious life into the secular world, but rather to laicize those religious places, dissolving and emptying their religious content and making the religious persons, monks and nuns, civil and laic before forcing them into the world, now conceived as merely a secular place emptied of religious symbols and religious meanings. This could well serve as the basic metaphor of all subtraction narratives of secular modernity, built upon secularist prejudices which tend to understand the secular as merely the space left behind when this-worldly reality is emptied of religion or to view unbelief as resulting simply from the progress of science and rational inquiry.

Even within Western secular modernity one can find, therefore, two very different patterns of secularization, one could even say two different types of secular modernity. This would be the basic underlying reality behind the different European and American patterns of secularization. But both can be viewed as pattern variables within the same basic post-Christian pattern of Western secularization. Moreover, using Taylor’s analytical framework, both are embedded within a common immanent frame and within the same secular age.
2. Global Secularizations

It just happened, of course, as we are becoming increasingly aware, that this particular historical pattern of Western Christian secularization became globalized through the no less particular historical process of European colonial expansion. As a result the immanent frame became in a certain sense globalized, at least certain crucial aspects of the cosmic order through the globalization of science and technology, certain crucial aspects of the institutional social order of state, market and public sphere, and certain crucial aspects of the moral order through the globalization of individual human rights. But the process of European colonial expansion encountered other post-axial civilizations with very different social imaginaries, which often had their own established patterns of reform in accordance with their own particular axial civilizational principles and norms. The outcomes that will result from these long historical dynamics of inter-civilizational encounters, conflicts, borrowings, accommodations and aggiornamenti are likely to change from place to place, from time to time, and from civilization to civilization.

Moreover, one could argue following Peter van der Veer that the very pattern of Western secularization cannot be fully understood if one ignores the crucial significance of the colonial encounter in European developments. Indeed the best of post-colonial analysis has shown how every master reform narrative and every genealogical account of Western secular modernity, needs to take account those colonial and inter-civilizational encounters. Any comprehensive narrative of the modern civilizing process must take into account the Western European encounter with other civilizations. The very category of civilization in the singular only emerges out of these inter-civilizational encounters.

This becomes even clearer the moment one attempts a genealogical reconstruction of the unique modern secular category of “religion”, which has now also become globalized. The modern secular invention of the “world religions” and the disciplinary institutionalization of the scientific study of religion are intimately connected with this globalization of religion. But one should be careful and avoid turning an essentialized secular modernity into the dynamic causal force of everything, including religion. One must simply recognize that there are no bounded histories within nation states, within civilizations or within religions. Even much of the master reform process of medieval
Christianity, as well as the renaissance and recovery of the memory of Greek and Roman antiquity, which have now become an integral part of the collective European past, are not fully intelligible without taking into account the Christian-European encounter with Islam and the many civilizational borrowings it acquired through such encounter.

Furthermore, Christian missions always accompanied European colonialism. Even in the case of French Republican colonialism, l’État laïque and l’Église Catolique, which were constantly at loggerheads at home, worked hand in hand in la mission civilatrice in the French colonies, whether in Muslim Algier, in pre-axial Madagascar, or in Buddhist Vietnam. In any case, even without looking at any particular outcome of the colonial encounter between Western, Christian and post-Christian, secular modernity and other civilizations, one can confidently say that generally the outcome is unlikely to have been simply the emptying of the non-Western and the superimposition of modern Western secular patterns and social imaginaries. Nor was it possible to simply reject the colonial encounter and preserve one’s own civilizational patterns and social imaginaries unaffected by Western secular modernity. The modern secular immanent frame may become globalized, but this will always happen as an interactive dynamic interlocking, transforming and refashioning of pre-existing non-Western civilizational patterns and social imaginaries with Western modern secular ones. Moreover, in the same way as “our” modern secular age is fundamentally and inevitably post-Christian. The emerging multiple modernities in the different post-axial civilizational areas are likely to be post-Hindu, or post-Confucian, or post-Muslim, that is, they will also be a modern refashioning and transformation of already existing civilizational patterns and social imaginaries.

From this perspective and now adopting a necessarily fictitious global point of view, one can observe three different, parallel, yet interrelated global processes which are in tension and often come in open conflict with one another.

There is, firstly, a global process of secularization which can best be characterized as the global expansion of what Charles Taylor has characterized as “the secular immanent frame”, which is constituted by the structural interlocking constellation of the cosmic, social and moral modern secular orders.

The cosmic order is configured as a disenchanted, impersonal, vast and unfathomable, yet scientifically discoverable and explainable, as well as technologically manipulable universe, which is nevertheless
paradoxically open to all kinds of moral meanings, can evoke in us the numinous experience of a *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinosum* as well as a mystical sense of a profound unity of our inner nature with outer Nature and the entire cosmic universe.

The social order is comprehended as a self-constituted and socially constructed impersonal and instrumentally rational order of mutual benefit of individuals coming together to meet their needs and fulfill their ends. In the process those individual agents establish collectively new specifically modern forms of sociation, the most prominent of which are the market economy, the public sphere and the citizenship “democratic” state, all being characterized in principle by immediate, direct and equal access.

The moral order is built around the image of the “buffered” self, a disengaged and disciplined rational agent equally impervious to external animated sources and in control of its own inner passions and desires, ruled either by utilitarian calculus in the pursuit of individual happiness or by universalistic maxims inspired and empowered to beneficence not only by a rational impartial view of things but by the discovery of human dignity, sympathy and solidarity. All three orders are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence, and thus functioning *etsi Deus non daretur*. It is this phenomenological experience that, according to Taylor, constitutes our age paradigmatically as a secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs.

But as the ongoing debates between the European and American paradigms and the discourse of American and European “exceptionalisms” make clear, this process of secularization within the very same immanent frame may entail very different “religious” dynamics.

3. Global Religious Denominationalism

Parallel to this process, which started as a historical process of internal secularization within Western Christendom, but was later globalized through the European colonial expansion, there is a process of constitution of a global system of “religions” which can best be understood as a process of global religious denominationalism, whereby all the so-called “world religions” are redefined and transformed in opposition to “the secular” through interrelated reciprocal processes of
particularistic differentiation, universalistic claims and mutual recognition.

4. Global Sacralizations

But the modern “secular” is by no means synonymous with the “profane” nor is the “religious” synonymous with the modern “sacred”. Only “the social as religious” is synonymous with the sacred in Durkheimian terms. In this respect, modern secularization entails a certain profanation of religion through its privatization and individualization and a certain sacralization of the secular spheres of politics (sacred nation, sacred citizenship, sacred constitution), science (temples of knowledge), and economics (through commodity fetishism). But the truly modern sacralization, which constitutes the global civil religion in Durkheim’s terms, is the cult of the individual and the sacralization of humanity through the globalization of human rights.

It is an open empirical question, which should be the central focus of a comparative-historical sociology of religion, how these three ongoing global processes of secularization, sacralization, and religious denominationalism are mutually interrelated in different civilizations, sometimes symbiotically as in the fusions of religious nationalisms, or in the religious defense of human rights, but often antagonistically as in the violent conflicts between the sacred secular immanent norms (of individual life and freedom) and transcendent theistic norms.