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.