



Prayer Before Studying Theology

Almighty and eternal God,
grant that we may grow in faith, hope, and love;
and that we may obtain what you promised,
make us love what you command;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Trinity 14

Secularization and the Marginalization and Increasing Irrelevance of Religious Belief and Practice

Definition of Secularization and Social Changes Associated with Secularization

The socio-economic developments of the modern period have introduced novel changes that have increasingly marginalized the influence and importance of religion. by limiting the conditions under which

(1) religious realities are seen as having present relevance to one's everyday affairs or to matters which affect the society as a whole or

(2) religious intervention in the affairs of others is seen as justified

- Religious meaning is thus no longer the or even a leading way in which people as individuals or as a group make sense of their world, their lives, their actions and their projects.
 - This substantially affects the time, energy and resources that are devoted to religious reflection and action.

In the pre-modern period one saw oneself as being situated within a broader world that was subject to (and the result of) divine ordering and divine intervention.

- History was therefore understood as a continuum that began with God's presence and action and aimed at (and would ultimately find its fulfillment in the achievement of) an ultimate goal for which God had made created things.
 - It was therefore impossible to understand the natural world unless one understood the supernatural world and the transcendent goals for which the natural world was made.

Religious elites aimed to make their communities relatively homogeneous with regard to the doctrines and lifestyle (e.g. restrictions on sexuality, marriage, type of education received, types of work performed, the way leisure time was spent, etc.) accepted by its members.

- The community was conceived to have a more hierarchical authority structure and a clear distinction between clergy/authoritative religious teachers and the laity.

The modern period (late eighteenth to early twentieth century) was characterized by an increasing process of democratization, which was correlated with

- an increasing emphasis upon
 - freedom of speech and freedom to protest
 - freedom of self-determination and self-development
- the public assertion of equality between persons of differing backgrounds
- autonomization in relation to religious authorities and traditional religious communities (including one's community of origin)
 - The individual is without constraint insofar as one is free to choose what one believes; religious beliefs are free in the sense that they are not controlled by any institution or orthodoxy and can be individually defined.
 - Consequently there is a weakening and dissolution of the hierarchical relations that were traditionally assumed to exist between the human and the divine
 - Thus, for example, a large number of people will no longer agree that "Going to church is a duty and an obligation." Instead they will assert that "Going to church is something you do if you feel it meets your needs."
 - Shift from religion being associated with objective truth to religion being associated with the subjective experience and felt needs of the individual
 - Religious texts may be viewed as examples of human self-expression.
 - Religious texts and doctrines may therefore become less important in the lives of the members of the religious community that traditionally viewed these as authoritative.
 - Truth exists only in relation to the person reading and interpreting the text for himself or herself.
 - Once the locus of value, authority and well being is shifted to the individual, traditional institutional forms of religion can at best be seen as ambivalent and at worst as opposed to autonomization.
 - Declining number of people loyal to the religious community in which they were born
 - Denominational mobility
 - Religious pluralism and the exploration and embrace of other religions
 - Bricolage (the assembling of religious or moral beliefs piecemeal from divergent sources by the individual in a dynamic manner)
 - Fewer are committed to or actively involved in the institutional life of the church
 - Commitment of most members is weakened.

- Church identity and authority is weakened (has diminished importance to its members and exercises less influence upon them)
- Religious movements that are most successful numerically are those that are not perceived as hostile to autonomization, while groups perceived to be hostile to autonomization (restrictive and closed communities) will experience significant numerical decline and loss of former influence.
- For traditional religious beliefs to be accepted, they must be validated in terms of the individual's personal experience.
- Religious communities must compete for acceptance on the same grounds as any other voluntary association and are assessed on largely the same criteria.

With the development of the modern nation-state and the rise of liberal democracy, there is also a functional differentiation between the public sphere and the private sphere.

- Religion is no longer seen as having a significant role in the legitimization of the socio-political order.
- State (as officially neutral with respect to religious beliefs)
 - supports and endorses a redefinition of human rights, human welfare, which does not depend upon traditional religious beliefs or religious communities
 - Religion is thus deprived of a role in public discussions of education, public policy, and intellectual/professional culture.
 - The increasing division of society into subsystems (politics, science/technological innovation, education, physical health, artistic expression) that are no longer seen as having any necessary or organic connection with religion means that religious belief is increasingly restricted in its range of influence, having less and less function outside a compartmentalized and increasingly narrow range of ecclesiastical activities.
 - This ultimately makes possible the abandonment of any religious symbolism in certain areas (e.g. science and economics, which were the first spheres to acquire autonomization)
 - Within these spheres, one's consciousness does not initially or naturally include God and public processes are routinely carried on without dependence upon God.
 - Because the state must remain neutral about the other-worldly claims of traditional religions, the new definitions of human well being will define human well being with access to and the receiving of this-worldly benefits.
 - In a capitalist, free-market system, attitudes of consumerism are transferred to intangibles (experiences and subjective benefits, including religious experiences and the subjective benefits to be had from religion).

- Otherworldly salvation thus become increasingly unintelligible and the benefits to be had from religion must be (and increasingly are) recast in terms of this-worldly benefits.
- God's transcendence is replaced by an emphasis upon God's immanence and immediate availability to confer benefits.
 - This shift away from objective duty/obligation and from a sense of God's transcendence/distance makes traditional conceptions of sin/guilt/atonement seem increasingly incomprehensible and these can be retained only when they are cast in terms of this-worldly language and given a subjective interpretation in terms familiar in popular psychology.
- The emphasis is shifted from doctrine to those aspects of ethics which trade upon a conception of our common humanity which is shared by the broader (non-religious or religiously neutral) society and are immediately comprehensible in terms of universal human empathy, universal human rights, and the subjective aspects of well being (e.g. dignity, etc.).

Social Effects of Secularization: Some Further Implications

Secularization can thus be defined as a decline in the social significance of religious belief and practice, which in turn will likely reduce the number of people (seriously) interested in religion, with an increasing number of people become merely indifferent to the latter. This in turn can make it more difficult to maintain and transmit elements of religious belief and practice.

One important difference is the transition from traditional natural or ascriptive community (e.g. being engaged in one's family's traditional form of employment within the town in which one's family has lived, with religion simply being a given part of this pre-modern social fabric) to seeing relationships, employment and religion as types of voluntary association, with religion being chosen on the basis of one's personal goals or a goal common to that group of people with which one has chosen to affiliate.

This individualism produces social fragmentation. There is no longer a single, broadly accepted account of the world and of life, but rather competing accounts offered by competing groups (which may be linked with competing social interests or, as a result of immigration, different ethnic groups).

The removal of the social support and reinforcement for the traditionally dominant religious account within the broader society and the emergence of competing accounts can lead to a *de facto* relativism, i.e. a decline in the plausibility of a single religion's uniqueness or even in the plausibility of religion itself. Where different versions of the world are seen to exist and compete for one's attention and allegiance, one has two basic options:

(1) One may attempt a reintegration at a higher level of abstraction--e.g. Christianity and Islam may be different but both are instances of religion and therefore share a number of fundamental, defining features in common and do certain fundamentally similar things.

(2) The second approach is compartmentalization and privatization--I'm a Christian and therefore have a Christian worldview; other people will have different commitments and therefore have different worldviews, each with a set of values and a logic peculiar to itself, although their worldviews are not of immediate relevance to me. (Note how big a concession this makes to the modern thought it is supposed to defend one against: There is not just one framework of meaning and value alone within the cosmos; instead it is recognized that the agent plays a significant role in giving the world a determinate order and value.)

(Note also how important mental, physical and/or organizational distancing is in compartmentalization --e.g. the white middle-class flight to the suburbs [physical], the increasing aloofness of the senior management from other levels within the company [organizational]. In each case, segmentation and compartmentalization occur in such a way that all persons no longer share a single world but are recognized as living in competing social worlds based upon different visions and values.)

When such alternative frameworks emerge within a society that has an egalitarian ethos (e.g. advocates as an ideal the equal access of all to the consumer market), the authority of any one account (religious pattern of explanation) is increasingly discounted. Significant social events will therefore increasingly occur quite apart from religious communities and their claims about religious meaning, since the discounting of religious accounts challenges religion's taken-for-grantedness, i.e. the assumption of religion's necessity in understanding the world, one's life and contemporary events.

When religious rationales were discounted, religious practices and values could only be defended by appealing to values generally recognized by the society (e.g. the rights or needs of the individual or what is supposed to be beneficial to the society as a whole). This rationalizing apologetic approach, however, actually undermined the religious practices and values it was meant to protect because it treated them as defensible or relevant only in light of certain broadly-received assumptions, not in light of the reasons peculiar to religion itself. Furthermore, religion can preserve its place and demonstrate its ongoing relevance only as long as it can continue to forge connections other than between individuals and the supernatural (alone), e.g. religion may function as a socializing or therapeutic agent in times of rapid social change.

The difficulty in avoiding such rationalizing apologetic is that increasingly one must participate (and cannot avoid participating) in secularized, pluralistic modern institutions and therefore must engage in a process of negotiation to secure whatever is wanted or

needed (e.g. we can't be like the Amish and opt out of modern socio-economic institutions easily and the latter are relatively secularized and rationalized by pragmatic means-end thinking concerning efficacy and are implemented through modern rule-governed bureaucracy and the service of highly specialized professionals that are accredited/licensed and generally trained by secularized professional institutions)--think e.g. of the contemporary institutions that provide education, health-care, welfare and social control.

The organization of society in ways that facilitates industrial production also plays an important role here, e.g. by facilitating and requiring mobility (disrupting traditional communities and patterns of relationship), requiring standardization, uniformity and reproducibility of results (institutionalizing pragmatic means-end thinking and forms of bureaucratic management that aim to control and regiment production in ways that secure uniformity, while no longer having any expectation of supernatural intervention).

Note for example the way that modern leadership and management literature is oriented toward instrumental questions about efficacy in attracting money or adherents and managing programs, while avoiding or having a very superficial treatment of the moral and spiritual (supernatural) aspects of leadership. Where universal efficacy is emphasized at the expense of the moral and spiritual aspects of leadership, "leadership" becomes little more than the ability to get other people to do what one wants, which is the natural religion of the unregenerate man.

What is missing here is a non-superficial commitment to

(1) humility and

(2) opting for less (i.e. not maximizing or optimizing one's ability to achieve whatever benefits are regarded by the broader society as constituting "prosperity") in order to achieve certainly purely religious goals that are sought for the sake of God alone (and will therefore, of necessity, never be valued by secular people);

(3) willing to accept challenge or reproof from others

Note also the implications of voluntarism (i.e. the individual can arrive at authoritative knowledge and appropriate personal commitments through their own private enquiry) on contemporary churches' understanding of their mission. As voluntary organizations that recognize their increasing lack of authority and diminishing ability to exercise influence, churches moderate their demands in an attempt to negotiate with prospective adherents. Furthermore, because of their increasingly insecure social position, church leaders may begin to compare their church with other voluntary social organizations or business/marketplace institutions with a view to maintaining a certain parity in training, remuneration and social/professional status between themselves and leaders of these other organizations/institutions.

Secularization is certainly not fatal to organized religion, but it does create some novel constraints that significantly hinder the achievement of the Church's mission; nonetheless, (a) Christian groups have the ability to make more or less of what is possible within the constraints of the new situation and (b) God's (often unexpected) intervention always remains the basis for our hope.