"SACRED" AND "SECULAR" AS TERMS FOR INTERPRETING MODERNIZATION IN INDIA

Frederick J. Streng

In discussing the importance of reason in his book *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment,* Ernst Cassirer suggested an important shift in Western culture from a pre-Enlightenment to a post-Enlightenment evaluation of life. He wrote: "The power of reason does not consist in enabling us to transcend the empirical world but rather in teaching us to feel at home in it."[1] While we in the last third of the twentieth century are being taught to feel at home in this world, we are also aware that "the home" which should provide at least some security and comfort, is in a state of flux.

Reason, together with the two value-levers of science and democratic political processes which were to correct misunderstanding and improper control of power, has turned out to be the instigator of change — a change that has brought new self-identities to individuals and groups, a change resulting in continual exposure to strange phenomena, and a change that seemingly impels us to an ever increasing rate of change.[2] The effort to learn to feel at home in this world has brought with it a growing sense that the world is not simply "out there" as such; rather, it is constructed and reconstructed through an interdependence of a cultural "past", present physical conditions, and subjective intentions and choices. Likewise, there is a sense among many people who are self-conscious of their "being in this world", that they are responsible for enhancing life without having a sure and clear perception of what enhancement could really mean.

It is in this context that people today are wrestling with religious questions and moral behavior. While many today still grow up with a set of traditional religious symbols, they also feel an inrush of change, a change that is often labelled "secularization" by the participants of traditional religions. The terms "secular" and "secularization" mean different things to different people ranging from living under a government impartial to different religious groups within a country to an insidious decline in raising ultimate questions, together with the substitution of pseudo-religion for the "true expression of the sacred".

Our interest in the notions of "sacred" and "secular" in the process of modernization is to examine some of the assumptions in their usage, and then suggest that they are multidimensional terms having different meanings when applied to different religious goals and cultural experiences. First, we will analyze three kinds of change in religious life: (1) shifts in the forms and meanings of sacred symbols, (2) change from one type of religious transformation process to another, and (3) a shift from the practices of traditional religious institutions to humanistic arts and sciences which function religiously for some people. In subsequent subsections of the essay we will examine some specific expressions of these three kinds of change found in India. By looking at these changes as *different kinds of processes* of change rather than as only one process, we can recognize a broad range of religious life

in the modern world for which the terms "sacred" and "secular" shift their meaning and pertain more to some religious forms in their traditional usage than to others.

The term "modernization" is often taken to be synonymous with the term "secularization". Also, because the term "modernization" is often set over against the term "traditional society", or "traditional religion" it is assumed to to express basically the loss of "sacredness". This definition of modernization assumes a simple correlation of "religious change" with the loss of traditional religious symbols. We suggest, rather, that there are at least three kinds of religious change that have taken place and are taking place in India today. By looking at three kinds of change we can also interpret the significance of secularization in at least three different ways.

The first kind of change is the one that has interested most historians of religion. It is a shift in the meaning of symbols and myths; it might be called re-mythologization. The religious interpretation of this kind of change assumes a clear distinction between the realms of the sacred and secular life, or between the "sacred" and the "profane". Geradus van der Leeuw has, for example, written: "*Religiosum* is that which because of some sacred quality is removed and withdrawn from us".[3] This realm of the sacred is manifested in a particular cultural form: a symbol, a place, a name, a person, or image that is, however, set off from ordinary existence. The importance of the presentation of sacredness through a particular form is brought out by W. B. Kristensen in his analysis of ancient Egyptian religion when he says: "The image and the spiritual reality have become one. It is in this sphere that all religion lives."[4]

This definition of all religion as the manifestation of the sacred in cultural forms is also followed by M. Eliade when he sees the history of religions as a history of "hierophanies", appearances of the Sacred. A manifestation of the Sacred, say in a particular ritual, separates the sacred form from all other forms; this means that the sacred form is a paradigm which must be repeated exactly, and whatever does not follow the sacralizing form is merely profane activity — i.e. activity without regard for the eternal symbols.[5] In this context only that cultural change that is expressive of the eternal paradigms can be considered *religious* change. Whatever is new religiously is what is "returned" to primal reality by means of symbolic forms. This kind of change emphasizes religious symbols, myths and rituals as the primal expression of religion. The term "secularization", in this context means the loss of sacred traditional religious symbols.

Another kind of change recognized by many historians of religion, however, is a shift within a religious tradition from one type of traditional religious structure to another structure. This is the type of shift, say, from a sacramental concern with ritual and institutional organization in Roman Catholicism to a Protestant emphasis on personal, inner experience of a divine presence within Christianity. It is also seen in the shift in Hinduism from a concern with living according to one's social duty (*dharma*) to an inner perception of Brahman through Yoga — i.e. realization of oneness with Brahman in an undifferentiated whole. In a conversion from one religious tradition to another, this typical religious shift would mean a shift from, say, a concern with credal statements in the Christian tradition to the rejection of attachment to words (as mere human constructions) in the Buddhist discipline of mindfulness. Thus, between religious traditions and within any specific tradition there are changes that can take place within individuals or groups of people who shift from one

type or "structure" of religion to another. In terms of a shift in the psychological and social processes of ultimate fulfilment, this kind of shift is a more radical kind of shift than the re-mythologization type of changes. In both the revaluing of mythical symbols and the shifting from one religious structure to another, the term "secularization" means the loss of an appeal to any experience, symbol, action, or sense of an eternal, universal, transcendent reality behind or prior to changing, derivitive forms. Like the first kind of change, the second also must still be related to some assumed eternal structure of life or absolute experience.

A third kind of change is the shift from any traditional religious process to modes of ultimate transformation in everyday social and personal life. This includes the effort to achieve ultimate fulfilment in the here and now through that which — from a perspective that dichotomizes the "sacred" and "secular" — is labelled "secular". The "power unto salvation" in the third kind of religious change, however, is not seen to be in a mythical-symbolical mode of awareness or thought to be related to any traditional structure that assumes an eternal absolute; rather, through a full attainment of human potentiality, such as in aesthetic, rational, interpersonal, and political-economic ethical sensitivities and activities, a person can actualize the deepest resources of life. This would be a shift to a humanistic effort at ultimate transformation in which "ultimacy" would not carry over the notion of "transcendent" or "static perfection" in an eternal realm; instead, it would emphasize a participation of the *process of becoming ultimately transformed* — both personally and collectively — that is available in the present world. Here, the term "secularization" is seen to be a dynamic "religious" force, which claims to thrust people into their most fundamental reality! It is the discovery of values and fulfilments yet undreamed of by ancient seers and prophets.

CHANGING SYMBOLS IN THE INDIAN TRADITION

Within India the first sort of change that we mentioned above is abundantly found. Such changes have been the object of study by historians of religion, and express the re-mythologization of ancient symbols and rites according to the lived experiences recorded in temple architecture, literature, expressions of reverence at shrines, and other rituals. We are reminded, for instance, of the intermingling of Aryan and Tamil visions of reality that resulted in Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. John Carman has expressed the dramatic character of this when he writes:

It was daring for a group of Brahmins to appropriate a tradition of Tamil hymns, daring to argue that agreement of these hymns with the Sanskrit scriptures, still more daring to allow Śūdras and Outcastes to become fellow members of the community of devotees, and perhaps most daring of all to insist that the venerable Sanskritic tradition did not help a Brahmin one whit in attaining salvation.[6]

That Indian people have had an eminent capacity to adapt themselves to change is the conclusion of Milton Singer in his book *When a Great Tradition Modernizes.* He argues that in urban centres, such as Madras, modernization is going on apace today with changes from, and continuities with, the Sanskrit tradition; and then he states:

The traditionalism of Indian civilization is *not* opposed to innovation and change, to modernity, to the foreign and the strange. Traditional India is not

a monolithic and immovable accumulation of immemorial customs and beliefs blocking the road to progress. India's traditionalism is rather a built-in adaptive mechanism for making changes. Essentially, it is a series of processes for incorporating innovations into the culture and validating them ... The validation culminates when a change can be related to the traditional layer of the culture. [7]

The sacred tradition, then, changes from time to time, incorporating new images, new views of humanity and the world, and new authorities. As historians of religions are quick to point out, it is the ability of a symbol to expand its meaning to incorporate many peoples' concrete experiences that makes it a vital symbol, and the basis for a thriving tradition.

The changes that pertain to expanding or augmenting the basic symbols with other symbols, then, is one form of change seen through the history of the Hindu community. In this understanding of the nature of religion, the main element in the dynamics of ultimate transformation is the recognition and repetition of the one symbol or rite, or the cluster of symbols and rites, that manifest the eternal, sacred reality. It is the central dynamics found, for example, in the development of the *karma-mārga* in Hinduism. First it is seen pre-eminently in the Vedic sacrifice as interpreted in the Brāhamaṇas, and continues in relation to other religious processes in the *saṁskāras,* in various initiations, and the ritual worship in the home and temple where the divine image is bathed, fed and put to rest. Another example of re-mythologization is the process that has been labelled "Sanskritization" in social-anthropological studies, in which the deities and ritual patterns found in the Sanskrit literature have incorporated local and regional non-Aryan Indian deities, legends, and religious practices. This is an expression of changes through remythologization for which the understanding of the Sacred manifested in symbols, myths, and rites is an important contribution to understanding the nature and concrete expression of religion.

CHANGES BETWEEN AND WITHIN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES

Besides the process of remythologizing, however, there have been other changes that have taken place within the Hindu community. These pertain more to basic differences in the processes of ultimate transformation than simply to shifts in the symbolic grasp of the world. They refer to the second type of change mentioned before. For example, the shift from *karma-mārga* to the *jñāna-mārga* — seen in the shift from Vedic sacrifice to the realization of Brahman within a person, according to the Upaniṣads — is not a rejection of Vedic authority, of Brahmins as the spiritual leaders of society, or of the Vedic deities. It was a shift in the basic structure of religious awareness and the nature of sacrality. While, indeed, it was also an "interiorization of the sacrifice", the development of a consciousness that everything is Brahman is not simply or basically the incorporation of psychological concerns into a cosmological symbol. It is the rejection of the process of symbolification as the *primary* means of ultimate transformation. For example, when a *yogī* uses an image of god in his meditation, it is to remind him that every perceptual or mental image is really the infinite Absolute: the use of a symbol is only a preliminary act to the full inner realization of "divine" or "pure" consciousness.

The recognition that all form is illusion is emphasized by the philosopher-mystic Śaṅkara, whose interpretation of the Upaniṣads carries to conclusion what is said in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad:*

His [Brahman's] form (*rūpa*) is not to be beheld.

No one soever sees Him with the eye.

He is framed by the heart, by the thought, by the mind.

They who know That become immortal. [8]

Similarly, in the history of Indian devotional religious life, where the conflict of Hindus with the Jains and Buddhists went beyond Jain devotional reverence for Mahāvīra and a Buddhist's devotional reverence for the Buddha, the conflict is more than just which authority is accepted, or which cosmological ideas and symbols provide the deepest grasp of life. The question is, rather, whether any symbol is, or can be, the self-evident manifestation of the true nature of reality — a reality which cannot be identified as eternal or non-eternal, as the permanent in distinction to the non-permanent.

This kind of change in religious life suggests that there is a basic inadequacy in viewing the mythic-sacramental model as the only, or even basic, model of religious change. Similarly, the dichotomy of the sacred and secular realms assumed in the mythic-sacramental model does not expose the central dynamics of the Hindu concern with *dharma* as an all-pervading normative value in daily life. Certainly the *dharma* is a central religious principle in the history of India; in fact, social duties and caste relationships have reflected a concern with social organization as a primary expression of an *eternal* order. The effort to live according to a sense of duty and family obligation continues as an issue in the development of modern forms of Hinduism.

While the sacred-secular dichotomy helps to understand the change in sacred symbols and rites, it is difficult to use it in order to understand the change in social order. This, I suggest, is due to the fact that there is a different structure of ultimate transformation implicit in living in the *dharma* than that found in mythical-sacramental awareness of the sacred. In the mythical-sacramental awareness of the sacred, there is the appearance of the *numinous* reality through a concrete, phenomenal object in which the power of life pours forth, revivifying and restructuring the dead and dissipating world of common experience. This is, indeed, the structure that engenders some religious communities, for example, the Holy Catholic Church — in which the Eucharist "is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows." [10] The reality of the numinous in the formation of some religious communities has led the historian of religion Joachim Wach to assert that "there has always been a consciousness of the numinous character inherent in the religious communion." [11] Here, however, he is talking about cult-communities, whose best examples are the communities found in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Parsee communions.

With regard to the *sanātana dharma,* however, we must ask: Is there a *numen* that the *dharma* is most concerned to manifest? Or, is the *dharma* itself a reality different from the *numen* as it is manifested through a special form? I think that it is different. *Dharma* is a pervading force, a comprehensive expression of the ultimate, that evokes *order* or *harmonious activity* rather than a special power manifested in a unique form. This eternal order is seen not as something that breaks into a secular (profane) world to renew a secondary and dependent creation; rather, it restructures, cultivates, and re-forms through

a continuing pulsation of life. It re-orders what is out of order; it realigns what is out of line.

Changes in social obligations and interactions within the *dharma* do not focus on the change of myths and symbols (or of the meanings of myths and symbols), as is the case when the manifestation of the *numen* in an eternal paradigmatic form is the key means to religious power. Cult activities and forms of social obligation can change as long as the new forms conform to the deepest currents of the tradition. Thus, the appeal of Mahatma Gandhi — who affirmed the *varna*-system while rejecting the notion of "outcastes" — was for a purer form of living out one's particular role within the social organism. It is *the social relationships* that are the form of the *dharma,* and thus the ultimate is incarnated not in a single person, symbol, or even special ritual action; it is incarnate in the ordered movement of society in relation to the environment, even to the stars.

The key religious question regarding change in relation to the *dharma* is not "What are the meanings of the sacred sybols?" or "What are the new, lived-meanings of a sacred symbol that come from new human experiences?" Rather it is: "What is the right or proper expression of the very order of life?" or "How can a person find his or her place in the cosmic order?" In this context, cult activities, or reverence expressed before special images or symbols, can function as secondary forces — not as primary forces — for including or excluding people from the community. In this way various *sampradāyas,* various philosophical positions, various styles of life — even that of the *yogī,* who from time to time separates himself from society — can be included in the harmony of the total order.

If we recognize that within the Hindu tradition there are different ways of being religious — different means of ultimate transformation rather than just different expressions of a single mythic-sacramental dynamic — we can understand the *religious* significance of what the sociologist M. N. Srinivas says when he notes that during the past couple of decades the lower and middle castes are Sanskritizing and the upper castes are modernizing. [12] By becoming "Sanskritized" the lower castes are taking on the marks of purity, or full reality, that already identify the upper castes, especially the Brahmins. They are participating in the religious dynamic of the mythic-metaphoric means of ultimate transformation. They participate in the first kind of change described before, and in doing so they extend and are transformed by the sacred symbols. Now, what about the upper castes that are "modernizing"? Are they becoming non-religious by reducing their ritual activities, by substituting Western education for Sanskrit learning, and by working with people who have different (and lower) caste status than they have? If one uses the model of the mythic-sacramental mode of religious life, then one would have to conclude that they are becoming secularized in the sense of becoming non-religious. If, on the other hand, one uses the participation-in-the-cosmic-order model of religious life, then a further question would have to be asked: Is the life that one lives in a modern, urban society conforming to the eternal harmony of the universe? According to Singer's study of modern industrialists in Madras, at least some Hindus affirm that their lives are an instrument of a cosmic process and their work is an expression of their social obligation to both their family and the nation. [13] The changes brought with modernization for these upper caste industrialists, then, are changes that bring about new social forms; but at the

same time these new forms are seen to participate in a *de-ritualized expression of social duty and obligation.*

NON-TRADITIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF ULTIMATE VALUE IN MODERN INDIA

Besides the different kinds of changes in religious symbols or social obligations that can be reabsorbed into the Hindu religious tradition, there is the third kind of change mentioned before. It is "secularization", which calls into question the basic assumptions of the traditional means of ultimate transformation. Here secularization is seen as a basic dynamic which re-evaluates the traditional basic religious assumptions. It includes a broad scope of possible expressions, but here I will mention only a few examples. It is the vision of joy and hope manifested in the lectures of Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, entitled *The Religion of Man.* [14] There he calls for "the expansion of our consciousness in a great reality of Man to which we belong". [15] Likewise, it is found in the call for courage and for a shift of values from personal gains to broad social gains by Ralph Buultjens in his volume *Rebuilding the Temple.* [16] He expresses the enthusiasm of a secular political-economic reformer when he asserts:

> Modernization is vital to the survival of Asia and religion is not . . . As the most potent part of Asian tradition, religion possesses a vast potential for energizing any task it espouses. The great challenge to the statesmen of our time is to harness and motivate this force, linking it to the critical need of Asian peoples for development. [17]

The development which is spoken of here as the critical need of Asian peoples is a development of self-identity that values indigenous nationalistic traditions and egalitarianism, a speedy and steady economic growth, and increased use of scientific innovation. Traditional religion is viewed socially as a tool to motivate and harness this development. The secondary role of traditional values is also expressed by the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who has written:

> Religion has played an important part in supplying some essential needs of human nature. But that type of religion has weakened its hold and is unable to meet the onslaught of science and rationalism. Whether religion is necessary or not, a certain faith in a worthwhile ideal is essential to give substance to our lives and to hold us together. We have to have a sense of purpose beyond the material and physical demands of our daily lives. [18]

In these brief excerpts we see that the vitality of human life and the vision for future realization of happiness is distinguished from the activities and beliefs of traditional religions. At best, traditional religion, with its sacred symbols, dharmic obligations, or yogic consciousness is viewed as a support for the real life that is to be lived *now*. This kind of "secularization" cannot be overlooked by historians of religion, if what the advocates claim as true is to be understood in its own terms. This secularization is a force that claims to express the truth of existence; however, it is a rejection of the processes of ultimate transformation found in traditional religion. Thus, to say that it is *simply* remythologizing or re-formation of absolute ethical claims is to interpret these claims from a different notion of truth than that which *they* assume. It is more appropriate to the task of the phenomenologist and historian of religion to understand them empathically and within their own structures of understanding.

CONCLUSION

By becoming self-conscious about the use of such a phrase as "sacred and secular" we can raise a question as to its adequacy for interpreting all forms of religious change. We have suggested that changes in *traditional* religious life are of at least two sorts. One kind of change that can take place in the traditional religious life is to substitute different forms, models, or prescriptions within the same structure of ultimate transformation. Thus, within a mythic-metaphoric structure, a contemporary Hindu devotee might wrestle with the question of whether or not Christ is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, or whether the imagery of the goddess Kali's destructive power is expressed for modern people by atomic bombs. Here a basic symbol is being extended by incorporating one's present exposure to the modern world within the meaning structure of the original symbol. Or a Gandhian *satyāgrahī* may relate his marches and boycotting to the implementation of spiritual exercises through *karma-yoga* in light of Gandhi's interpretation of the Bhagavad-gītā. In this sort of change, human processes such as rationality, aesthetic awareness, or social experience are indications and expressions of a traditional religious structure; and instead of being recognized as independent processes of ultimate transformation these human modes of awareness are used by the powerful religious structure of mythic-symbolic meaning.

A second kind of change is from one structure of ultimate transformation to another, such as a shift from a symbolic-sacramental mode of religious life as found in the Vedic ritual to the realization of truth in a higher consciousness as given in the Upaniṣads, and epitomized in Śaṅkara's teaching. Both of these structures are found in the Hindu tradition — together with other structures, such as the structure of daily living in the cosmic law (*dharma*). A shift of one or another of these structures into the center of a person's or a group's religious life could alter the religious orientation radically — for example an obedient son, because of a shift, could leave home prior to marriage to become a wondering ascetic. At the same time there is often an interaction of different structures within the same person or group, one structure taking precedence over another. For example, a myth-structure can influence the conceptualization of the social fabric, as when Rāma is regarded as the protector of the social order. However, the experience of the Lord in one's heart as detailed in any one of several *bhajans* or *kīrtans* may equalize all castes before the Lord. Or, we see a restatement of social obligation and responsibility as the modern Madrasi industrialist reinterprets the *varṇāśrama dharma* by becoming more democratic in his social relations in the market place.

A third kind of change in the modern world is found where the traditional processes of ultimate transformation are themselves rejected, or at best *used* by other cultural forms to implement a different set of religious dynamics. It is one in which human processes such as rationality, aesthetic sensitivity, personal interrelations with other people, or political-economic concern take over as a process of ultimate transformation in this life and function as the most profound transforming power in existence. Again, as in the processes found in traditional religious life, there are overlapping and interchanging elements among these human processes, so that a modern advocate of human development might combine and perfect his or her faculties of reason, social concern, and technological creative power. The goal here is to improve the

present world, and thus a person centering on these human processes is labelled a "secularist" by the traditional religious person who finds the source of life in a transcendent realm. This type of change needs to be studied in its own terms of what reality is, as a force that functions ultimately for those who advocate it.

The suggestion that there are at least three kinds of change going on in the process called modernization has an implication for the study of religion. It is that the use of a model of religion based on only one process of ultimate transformation is most effective for understanding some of the religious data. It also implies that it is hazardous to extend it to data having other religious processes as their mode of transforming life from what is less than real, full of pain, and self-destructive to what is fully real, joyful, and vital. Rather, in the continuing effort to find tools of research and understanding, students of phenomenology and history of religion might well try to test some hypotheses which assume a plurality of basic foci, contexts, and mechanisms of religious life.

Southern Methodist University

FOOTNOTES:
1. E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment,* trans. F. Koeller and J. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon, 1951, first published in 1932), p. 13.
2. See, for example, Barbara Ward, *Five Ideas That Change the World,* (New York: Norton, 1959).
3. G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation,* trans. J. E. Turner (New York: Harper and Row, 1963; first published 1933), p. 49.
4. W. B. Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion,* trans. J. B. Carman (The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1960), p. 396.
5. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion,* trans. R. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 33. Also see Eliade's discussion of historical consciousness in his *Cosmos and History,* trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959; first published 1949), pp. 141–2.
6. J. Carman, "Report from South India", *The Religious Situation:* 1968, ed. D. R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 422.
7. M. Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes.* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p.404.
8. Katha Upanishad 6:9; found in *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads,* trans. R. E. Hume (London: Oxford University Press, 1962; first published 1877), p. 359.
9. See, for example, M. Singer's discussion on the discovery of a vitalizing principle of Indian civilization in *When a Great Tradition Modernizes,* pp. 250–260.
10. From *The Documents of Vatican II,* ed. Walter Abbott, S.J.; trans. Msgr. J. Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 143.
11. J. Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions,* ed. J. M. Kitagawa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 124.
12. M. N. Srinivas, "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization", *Far Eastern Quarterly,* Vol. 15, No. 4 (August, 1956), pp. 481–96. See discussion in M. Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes,* pp. 260–261.
13. M. Singer, *op. cit.,* pp. 350–359.
14. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1931).
15. *Ibid.,* p. 113.
16. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974).
17. *Ibid.,* pp. 135-316.
18. J. Nehru, *India Today and Tomorrow* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1959; published by Orient Longmans Private Ltd., 1960), pp. 7–8.