

## THE MEANING AND FORMS OF SECULARISM: A NOTE <sup>1</sup>

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The Latin word "saeculum" is of uncertain origin. According to scholars, it is regularly used in Classical Latin to mean "generation", "age", "a long period of time". In Christian usage it came to mean the world as opposed to the church. The Oxford English Dictionary records the use of the term "secular" to mean "belonging to the world, as distinct from the church and religion; civil, lay, temporal, chiefly with the negative sense of non-ecclesiastical, non-religious, or non-sacred". This usage is found as early as 1290. In a secondary usage of the word, the clergy who did not live in an order but in the world were called secular. Hooker's use of the term in his *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1597, is a good example of the Christian usage throughout the centuries until recent times: "Religion and the fear of God as well induceth secular prosperitie as everlasting blisse in the world to come."

A somewhat new dimension of the meaning and context of the concept of secularism emerges at the Peace of Westphalia in 1646. In this context, it meant the expropriation of ecclesiastical property for worldly purposes. This usage gradually led, a century later, to the idea that secularisation is the *rational* and *natural* order of things. It is important to note, however, that all acts of expropriation of ecclesiastical property cannot be regarded as secularisation in the above sense of the term: the acts of expropriation in the time of the Reformation, for example, were intended to renew and reactivate the unity of the spiritual and worldly interests while it is the increasing separation of the two spheres of interest that is one of the most important ideas in the development of the concept of secularisation in modern times. Stallmann aptly points out: "As a political concept secularisation is characteristic of the age in which political power became an independent worldly power, and in which at the same time religion was increasingly distinguished as the 'inward' affair of man from his 'outward' political and civil status."

Proceeding from this separation between the "inner" and "outer" life of man, which carries within it the possibility of the autonomy of each, the next most significant development is recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary in the following definition of secularism which it dates 1851: "The doctrine that morality should be based on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or a future state." This definition reflects the thought of a remarkable man, George Jacob Holyoake, who lived from 1817 to 1906. In the next section of this presentation, I have attempted a systematisation of contemporary thinking on secularism and secular theology in terms of three different but inter-related theories. Holyoake's thinking in the mid-nineteenth century already contains so many basic ideas of all the three trends that I wish to present his ideas in brief before passing on to contemporary thought.

Holyoake was attracted to the views and ideals of Robert Owen, and became

a lecturer in the Owenite movement. In 1841 he was the last person to be jailed in England for public blasphemy, and served a sentence of six months. It may in fact have been this experience which led him to describe his position by coining the neutral term "secularism" in preference to the more dangerous term "atheism".

A clear and enthusiastic account of his views is found in a volume entitled *Christianity and Secularism* (London, 1863). It contains the verbatim report of a public discussion which took place in January and February of that year between Holyoake and an Independent minister. The general question to which the speakers addressed themselves was: what advantages would accrue to mankind generally, and the working classes in particular, by the removal of Christianity, and the substitution of secularism in its place. The details of this debate are highly interesting but it is not possible to go into them here. However, one must remark upon the prophetic significance of the terms of this debate which were framed so precisely more than a hundred years ago.

Holyoake did not want to be a systembuilder. He was not interested in elaborating a philosophically respectable world-view to oppose and replace the Christian one. What he offered was simple maxims and practical guidance. He stated his presuppositions as follows: "We believe in relative Truth and discretionary Silence; in Reason as a test; in Science as a power; in Service as a duty; and in Endurance as a virtue." As to the existence of God he is simply agnostic. Morality he defines as the "system of human duties commencing from man." It is contradistinguished from religion which, for Holyoake, is "that system of human duties assumed to commence from God."

A secularist is defined as "one who gives primary attention to those subjects the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life. The secularist principle requires that precedence should be given to the duties of this life over those which pertain to another world." Although for the purposes of the debate he insists that he is only claiming *precedence* for the concerns of this life, it is clear from the course of the debate itself that these concerns in practice exclude and render unnecessary any other-worldly theistic system. He adds, "you cannot reform the world by a legal coup d'état. You must be content to study men in groups, and meet their states of thought specially and patiently."

The weight of his argument is that attention to temporal things is based upon practical experience of "the living interests of the hour" whereas Christianity is a matter of speculation. The Christianity he wishes to displace is defined as "moulding human duties to suit the prospects of another life." About the use of the Sabbath he writes, "The precept, 'Keep the Sabbath-day holy', we would interpret into keeping it healthfully, usefully, instructively. Secularism would take, when necessary, the poor factory-jaded Sunday scholars into fields — that schoolroom of Nature: It would throw open the Clyde on the Sunday to the Sunday steamer, that the poor Glasgow weaver might gaze on Ben Lomond on the Lord's Day. It would give the mechanic access to museum, and botanical gardens, crystal palaces, and even to the theatre on that day. We would do it, because one drama of Shakespeare is a nobler creation than any sermon which was ever preached."

In brief, Holyoake wishes to "free the Secular sphere . . . to authorise all men to walk in it without alarm of any kind, like that created by . . . many parts of the New Testament . . . We would not pray for the people, after the Church and Dissenting manner — we should seek to help them. We should not send dogma missionaries to the heathen — we should send arts, sciences, and

instructors." "Leave religious dreamers to wait on supernatural aid — let us look to what man can do for man." "During the prevalence of a pestilence an hospital is of more value than a college of theologians." Against the doctrine of "special interpositions", Holyoake boldly sets the world of man, guided by what scientific powers he is able to acquire. "Every stick and stone", he says, "every blade of grass, every bird and flower, every penniless man, woman, and child, has an owner in this England of ours no less than in New Orleans."

The following quotation summarises Holyoake's views:

The problem solved by secularism is this, that this partially comprehended and unexplored universe is yet, in its material and ascertainable relations to man, a possible theatre of the limitless happiness of humanity — that the light of duty may be seen, that a life of usefulness may be led, indefinite refinement may be attained, and tranquility in death, and the highest desert in untried existence beyond us may be won, though the Origin of all things shall be hidden from us, and the Revelations of every religious sect shall be rejected.

The great significance of Holyoake's theory lies in its astonishing modernity, one might even say, its updateness. Already in this work of 1863, one can find the key ideas of both liberal positivist secularism and Marxist revolutionary secularism. Also current radical theological secularism is foreshadowed by Holyoake. Indeed in his theory even in the summary form given here, one can already see the beginnings of a crucial ambiguity in the concept of secularism. On the one hand, there is a challenge to Christianity to be central to man's life here and now, to be a force in the world; on the other, secularism is being presented as an alternative world-view which could, and should, replace the Christian, or indeed, any religious or metaphysical world-view. This ambiguity persists up-to-date. In 1928 the International Missionary Council meeting in Jerusalem reflected this ambivalence very clearly. It was characteristic of the Conference that one speaker should find it possible to say that, "we are agreed on the fact of the opposition of secular civilisation to Christianity," and that another speaker should say that, "in many respects secular civilisation is a disinterested pursuit of human welfare."

On the one hand Cannon Charles Raven said: "It will be necessary for us to accept all this rich contribution of this new way of life (secularism) . . . Secular civilisation has provided a satisfying opportunity for personal development, not only in the pursuit of truth, but also in providing outlets for activities which supply all the values which religion was accustomed to provide . . . Our problem is to find how Christianity can baptise the new learning and the new social order with the spirit of Christ . . ."

On the other hand, Rufus M. Jones in a leading paper on "Secular Civilisation and the Christian Task", defined secularism as "a way of life and an interpretation of life that include only the natural order of things and that do not find God, or a realm of spiritual reality, essential for life and thought." and declared it "a rival movement as powerful, as dangerous, as insidious as any of the great historical heresies."

From this brief survey we can see how it was almost inevitable that divergent theories of secularism should develop in the course of modern western history and that one should find a fundamental ambivalence in the contemporary intellectual stance of secularism.

Theories of secularism can be analysed in terms of three concepts:

contemporaneity, co-existence and autonomy. To these roughly correspond (a) the theological, (b) the political and (c) the economic-philosophic (or Marxian) levels and contexts of interpretation. It is not suggested that these represent three distinct and precise meanings or mutually exclusive contexts. This conceptual distinction is simply an exegetical tool. In fact, today the different meanings, uses and contexts of 'secularism' overlap and interpenetrate most of the time. And hence it is very difficult to avoid mixing up various meanings of the term.

The following analysis of the idea of Secularism in terms of the concepts of contemporaneity, coexistence and autonomy seeks to show that even in the midst of variety and confusion of meanings of secularism, there is one that remains central.

The term 'secular', as already indicated, is derived from the Latin 'saeculum' which means 'an age', 'an indefinite period of time' or 'the present age.' To be secular would thus mean to be concerned with one's age or time, and, by extension, it will stand for interest and involvement in this-worldly affairs. Thus secularism will be contradistinguished from non-temporal, eternal, supermundane or other-worldly interests and affairs. Hence the 'secular' has often been opposed to the religious or sacred, having from this point of view, mainly a negative value. "Secularisation, once branded the enemy, has suddenly become the darling of recent Protestant theology and there are strong indications that the more progressive Catholic theologians are softening". We now have serious and respected theologians, such as Van Buren, who expounds the "secular meaning of the Gospel", and Altizer who proclaims "the death of God" and propagates "Christian Atheism".

This fundamental shift in the understanding of secularism has taken place through an emphasis on the centrality of history ("God acts in history"): secularism has sometimes been defined as "the historicization of man's existence"; also through a desire to give to religion and church a contemporary relevance. One can see this clearly prefigured in Holyoake. Secular theologians feel deeply concerned about making religion (Church) individually and socially relevant and significant to the industrial-technological man. Instead of the conventional exclusion of secular (temporal, worldly) concerns from the religious life of man and the consequent indifference of the Church to it, the secular theologians want the Church to be with man in all the spheres of his life and thus be at one with the times (instead of being at odds with it). He, therefore, strives for a reinterpretation of the Christian tradition which will be consistent with scientific knowledge and the consciousness of 'modern man'. In practical application, therefore, theological secularism is largely a matter of ecclesiastical reorientation and reform. Theoretically, though, this is scarcely acknowledged — it implies a resacralization of the secular even though it begins with demythologization and desacralization. Indeed, at the highest level, its logic tends to the identity of the sacred and the secular.

Whether one looks upon secular theology as an attempt to reactivate religion by giving it a total, contemporary meaning, or as a movement away from true religion by reducing it to *modern* (as distinguished from traditional) anthropology, it is a *radical* interpretation of secularism. In contrast, there is the approach in terms of co-existence of the Religious and the Non-religious. In this interpretation secularism mediates between religion on the one hand and politics and education (and culture) on the other. Secularisation is then seen as essentially the process by which the nature and spheres of politics and

education (and culture) are separated from religion and are thus defined and delimited in relation to it. Each sphere can then function freely without interference from Religion. It is also to be noted that though Education and Culture are separated from Religion, they are both dominated by Politics. This is basically a political use of the concept of secularism since it is based on the separation and balance of powers. This is true whether the relation between the Church and the State is hierarchical or coordinate. The concept of the secular state belongs here. It may refer to a state that is non-religious in nature with its authority limited to non-religious matters; or, given a situation of religious plurality and socio-cultural heterogeneity, a state that is neutral and impartial in all religious, cultural and educational matters. In the latter case, the state can hardly be called secular in any specific sense of the term. It may also be pointed out that a religiously neutral state and one that is impartial towards different religions are logically quite different. Sociological theories of secularisation which treat it as an aspect of increasing differentiation of the social system or those which interpret secularism in terms of open vs closed social systems, also belong here. Basic to this whole approach are two ideas: one, that the religious can be effectively isolated from all other spheres of social life, and two, that religion can be a wholly private affair of the individual. The first is highly doubtful. To separate the religious from the social and the public is, in effect, to reduce it to a residual category after the social and the public have been defined independently of religion. The idea that religion is a wholly private affair of the individual is only a positive form of this negative result.

The third use of the concept of secularism is again radical. This use clearly involves the rejection of the sacred, mythological, transcendent world-view and an hierarchical social system and substitutes for it the promise of a fully scientific, humanistic, empirical, relativistic, immanentistic, evolutionary world-view; and an "open", "egalitarian" social system. On this view of secularism, the ultimate basis of all authority is historical and "rational", not transcendent, divine or mystical. It proclaims the autonomy and centrality of man (of *homo faber*, not *homo religiosus*). In modern times the most systematic, thorough-going and powerful formulation of secularism in this sense is to be found in Marx. All *modern* philosophy that is *not* grounded in metaphysics (properly so-called) or in a Revelation has a fundamental kinship with Marx.

The difference between this and the theological theory of secularism arises from the ambiguity of the latter. Contemporaneity means looking at time in terms of eternity, but it could also mean looking at eternity in terms of time. Since the concept of contemporaneity seeks to abolish or transcend the dichotomy of time and eternity, it posits an equational relation between the two. An equation is the temporal expression of an atemporal identity and hence is always inherently ambiguous, that is, it can always be interpreted from the reverse side.

If the religious (sacred)-secular dichotomy is maintained, the third is the fundamental meaning of secularism: all the other meanings that have been mentioned here either presuppose it or logically lead to it. More specifically, the second interpretation (co-existence) cannot be maintained without an eventual acceptance of the third (autonomy) interpretation.

It may be useful at this point to recapitulate the argument. Firstly, the dichotomy of the sacred-profane or religious-secular, is itself the essence of secularism; for so long as the superordination of the sacred and the religious is

maintained, the reality of the profane, the secular, is subsumed under the higher reality of the sacred and the religious. So the dichotomy can be tenable only if and when this superordination is rejected which one would not be justified in doing unless the higher reality of the sacred and the religious were also to be denied. Logically this leaves us with the religious and the secular (non-religious) as two coordinate spheres. But there are other implications. To make the higher coordinate with what has been lower is to demote the higher and promote the lower. Also it changes fundamentally the nature of the religious. So it becomes necessary to redefine religion in consonance with the new status of the secular and this already implies the superordination of the secular. Sociologically different spheres cannot coexist coordinately (which implies the internal autonomy of each) unless each is subordinate to a common sovereign principle and authority. Since such a principle and authority are not posited in the Co-existence Theory of Secularism, religion has to be socially subordinate to the secular authority and its autonomy can be preserved, if at all, in the strictly private world of the individual, if there be such a world.

The Contemporaneity Theory of secularism suffers from a fundamental ambiguity built into it by the paradox of the equational relation between eternity and time. This inherent ambiguity of secularism really cuts our distinction between contemporaneity and autonomy, for now autonomy itself can be one of the two modes of interpreting and understanding the concept of contemporaneity as a theory of secularism. The most crucial issue with regard to man's religious life today is, therefore, between these two alternative interpretations. They may be called the autonomous humanistic and the transcendent-radical interpretations of secularism.

The autonomous-humanist interpretation has two main forms: the Marxist and the Liberal. Marxism declares the greater glory of man as the goal of human history and is based on the promise of the eventual disappearance of religion not only in its hitherto manifested forms but also in other future forms like the religion of humanity or scientific religion. To hold that Marxism or Communism itself is a new religion is not really helpful or relevant in this context because either it is a disguised criticism of Marxism-Communism, in which case it has no positive relevance, or it implies a subsumption of religion and non-religion under a single unnamed category and this would be quite unwarranted, unless such a category is specified and shown to be logically tenable.

For want of space this form of autonomous secularism cannot be discussed here. Let us, therefore pass on to the Liberal form of autonomous Secularism which, again, has two chief variants and examine the other two forms and examine them briefly. One of them has been called Civil Religion of which Robert Bellah has recently given a systematic exposition. The other is called the Neo-episodic Theory of Progress; Ernest Gellner is its proponent. There is an essential kinship between the two, though they look quite different from each other.

The following paragraphs summarise Robert Bellah's theory of Civil Religion in America:

There seems little doubt that a successful negotiation of this third time of trial — the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world-order — would precipitate a major new set of symbolic forms. So far the flickering flame of the United Nations burns too low to be the focus of a cult, but the

emergence of a genuine trans-national sovereignty would certainly change this. It would necessitate the incorporation of vital international symbolism into our civil religion, or, perhaps a better way of putting it, it would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion might take, though it obviously would draw on religious traditions beyond the sphere of Biblical religion alone. Fortunately, since the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality, the reorganisation entailed by such a new situation need not disrupt the American civil religion's continuity. A world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfilment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed, such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself.

Behind the civil religion at every point lie Biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.<sup>2</sup>

The other form of the humanist autonomous secularism — the neo-episodic Theory of Progress — is summarised in the following quotation from Ernest Gellner.

Progress theories can be subdivided into three species: the Episodic; the Evolutionist; and the neo-episodic. These are the distinctions we need, and this also is roughly the order in which these species of the theory appeared on the scene . . .

This then in the third, the 'neo-episodic' way of conceiving progress, and the one which now effectively underlies social thought. It has various, and to my mind, decisive advantages over the previous two kinds, the (odd) episodic and the global-entelechy types — including, incidentally, the advantage of being concerned with something that really happens, *and* the advantage of already in fact pervading the contemporary social consciousness. It has the advantage over the entelechy stories, that it is concerned with a concrete episode, however, large, rather than with the totality of things. But at the same time, the neo-episodic outlook takes note of — indeed, it *concentrates* on — those very facts which had, above all others, inspired Evolutionism; the sense and perception of rapid, cumulative change, somehow pointing or seeming to point in some one direction. Those very changes which originally suggested Evolutionism, which was indeed an extrapolation from them, are the very stuff of that crucial Episode which, on the present argument, is the very proper starting point of social thought; thus, in a way, they are now elevated to an even higher dignity than they enjoyed within the Evolutionist scheme.<sup>3</sup>

It would be undoubtedly interesting and useful to analyse both these developments of secularism as associated with Bellah and Gellner as they impinge on the religious situation in the contemporary world, but this has to await some other opportunity. Our purpose here is to underline some of the major points of Bellah and Gellner and to show their kinship as secular universalists.

Bellah's theory of civil religion centres religion first in American history, and then by the same process extends it to world-history. The history of civil religion and, according to this theory, of all future religion, thus becomes coextensive with the history of America in the world. The religiousness of all other peoples in the world, — followers of different traditions — thus becomes automatically involved in, indeed a part of, the American role and destiny in world-history.

The basis of this new unified world-religion would, according to Bellah, be twofold:

- (a) Faith in a supranational reality of power.
- (b) A symbol-system that would presumably be an interpretation of this supranational reality and would evolve synthetically or eclectically from the symbol-systems of the existing world religions — just as the symbol-system of the present American civil religion has been derived from the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Let me now point out the close relationship that exists between Bellah's Theory of Civil Religion and Gellner's neo-Episodic Theory of Progress (and its corollary, Transitionalism).

In order to bring out the close kinship between the two, let me note, in a summary form, some of their most important differences and similarities.

1. Unlike Bellah, Gellner proposes his neo-Episodic Progressism and the ideology of Transitionalism derived from it, not as a new religion but as a philosophy in terms of which religion implicitly becomes obsolete.

2. Accordingly, unlike Civil Religion, Gellner's position is immanentist and has a positive orientation to time. It does not explicitly bring in any transtemporal dimension. It tries to by-pass (though not very successfully) the problem of eschatology, which, through Christianity, has been one of the sources of the idea of meaning in human history. And yet, like the theory of Civil Religion, it is both historical and contemporary. This it achieves through making the concept of Transition central.

On the other hand, we may also note two basic similarities between the theories of Bellah and Gellner:

1. Both have a world-historical (global) orientation which disregards the existing traditional religions of the world.

2. Both provide a basis for making all religions — natural, supernatural, mystical, transcendental, metaphysical, existential, prophetic, revelatory — marginal to man's life. At the same time, both attempt to establish a non-religious world-historical task as the *telos* of man's highest life. (In Bellah, the problem is to attain 'some kind of viable and coherent world-order'; in Gellner it is the 'diffusion of industrialization carried out by national units'.) In this sense both Civil Religion and neo-Episodic Progressism are based on a secular eschatology.

Thus one can see Gellner's theory as a generalization of Bellah's idea which can serve as the philosophical basis of Civil Religion.

This is the stage, I think, to reflect on the nature of the two developments of secularism in relation to religion today. If these reflections prove to be sound, they will significantly bear on that other development of secularity, which a little earlier we indicated as a radical movement in terms of contemporaneity and which, I tried to show, is really a move toward a renewal of man's religious life.

With reference to Gellner's theory a general theoretical observation may be in order here. The three species into which Gellner with great penetration analyses the modern Progress Theory can be further seen as pseudo-creationist, pseudo-metaphysical and pseudo-Christian. Episodic theories of Progress are centred in a postulated protohistorical Event which can be seen as the historicization of the archetype of God's creation of the world *ex nihilo*. The Evolutionist theories are process centred. Here an historicization of cosmological myths is involved. The neo-Episodic theory of progress is oriented not to the origin of the universe but to the history of the world. This theory can be seen as the secularisation of the Advent and the Christian Kerygma.

In introducing the idea of traditional myths and archetypes, there is no intention to suggest an analogical correspondence between these archetypes and modern theories of Progress. The point rather is to show that the latter are profanations of the corresponding archetypes. (Perhaps Gellner himself is aware of these implicit parallelisms, though obviously he does not wish to suggest it. His view of Progress as a secular salvation is a good indication of his thinking in this direction.)

Apart from the excellent reasons given by Gellner for the failure of the Episodic and Evolutionist theories, one may also remark that the episodic theories of progress are too close to creationism, for in Europe's flight from the traditional religious world-view, it would quickly yield place to the evolutionist theory which is in fact wholly anti-creationist. However, its structure is ahistorical and apolitical, and hence by itself it is not quite consonant with the newly emerging scientific secular world-view. Hence evolutionism has to be conjoined with the idea of natural progress ("the upward slope", in Gellner's illuminating phrase) to hold a difficult balance between the eschatological ethos and the Promethean élan of modern European Civilization.

It is this tension within the evolutionist idea of Progress that gives rise to the neo-Episodic theory of Progress which tries to overcome it by its Promethean élan — a secularization of the Advent and the Kerygmatic dimension of Christianity. This must be remembered when one looks at the continued and nearly global success of the "neo-Episodic theory of Progress"; first as post-mediaeval imperialism and now as modernization.

This geneological ideography is intended as a footnote towards understanding the extraordinary strength of the secular idea in the form of recent theories of imperialism and modernization. It should be clear, however, that these analytical parallelisms have no important bearing either on the merit of the three theories of Progressism or on the truth of what have been seen here as their archetypes.

Coming to specific reflections, the first observation to make, particularly for an Asian, is that both these developments involve a vision of world-secularism which renders the history and nature of other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam completely subordinate to the history of modern Euro-American civilisation. The most crucial point is that the history here in question is not the history of the religiousness of the West. The history to which the theories of Civil Religion and neo-Episodic Evolutionism subordinate the religions and the histories of the non-Western peoples is the history of technology and, at best, the history of the liberal-humanist "ideology". It is certainly not the history of Christianity, or Judaism which have been the dominant religions of the West so far. From this point of view

the other form in which secular Christianity has been interpreted today, viz. the theory represented among others by Van Leeuwen<sup>4</sup> (which I did not have time to discuss even briefly) is *not* such a fundamental challenge to the religiousness of contemporary man, particularly in Asia and Africa — because, in this interpretation of modern secularism, technology and the present dominant role of western history is interpreted as basically a development from within Christianity. And even though the future history of the world is conceived in terms of the Christianization of the non-Western world, the terms of interpretation, the vision itself, is still religious, whatever the interpretation. However, the fundamental weakness of this and all such theories, at least from a non-Westerner's point of view, is that the idea of human unity, which can be meaningful only at the transcendent, transtemporal level, is interpreted at a concrete historic level, at which level it is indistinguishable from universal domination of one group (over the rest). In other words, the idea of a world-religion implied in Van Leeuwen's theory of Christian history compromises the transcendent basis of religion. It seems to me that secularism has somehow got built into his interpretation of the history of Christianity. If this be so, though perhaps I misunderstand him here, it reveals an internal threat to the religiousness of man both in the Christian and non-Christian world.

To come back to our two forms of secularism, namely, Bellah's Civil Religion and Gellner's neo-Episodic theory of Progress, we may now point out the internal connection between the two in the context of similarities and dissimilarities we indicated a little while ago. In order that the theory of history implicit in Bellah's views may be generalised, it is necessary to provide a basis for the American Destiny in terms of which the whole theory of Civil Religion is constructed. And this will involve explaining away traditional religions, for otherwise a specific segment of human history cannot be put in the centre of universal history without bringing in a theology of history which the theory of Civil Religion really fights shy of. The evolutionary theory does this task. What the evolutionary theory of religion really implies is that either a sociology or a philosophy of history can replace religion; and this, consistently followed through, leads one to a position similar to that of Marx. The task of the sociology of religion, as it has been developed in the West, is to maintain the dividing line between Marxism and Humanism, thus guarding against a total loss of Christianity or of any traditional religion which Marxism involves. Thus if this depth-analysis is at all sound, a most insidiously dangerous form of secularism in relation to contemporary man's religiousness is the development of a sociology of religion.

What basis do I have for being as critical as I have been throughout of the autonomous, immanentist-humanist concept of man's history? It is a large and fundamental question and requires a whole paper to itself. Here, I can deal with it only very briefly. The acceptance or rejection of such a world-view depends, in the last analysis, on the presupposed concept of Man.

Actually the phrase 'concept of man' is misleading. Only if it were possible to conceptualise man, would it be a legitimate question whether it is *homo religiosus*, *homo faber*, or a social/political/historical man which constitutes the true concept of man. But man cannot be conceptualised because all conceptions come from him and he cannot be subordinated to his own conceptualising power, however high it may rank among his other powers. The question, "Who am I?", is the only way to put the question of man's identity, for man cannot be objectified or conceptualised. The very form of this question

reveals both our infinitude and our finitude; for it is one of the paradoxical questions which must be asked but cannot be answered. The mediator between the grandeur and the misery of man, between his infinitude and his finitude is Tradition in its twin modes: the Transcendent-Spiritual, and the Religio-Historical. This is why neither a Nation-State nor a World-State nor World-History, nothing temporal, nothing that is in principle finite, can be the essence of man's religiousness. Nor, for the same reason, can religion be reduced to Anthropology or Sociology; for, to do so would be to eliminate the infinitude of man revealed by the syntax of the question, "Who am I?" Since hope is the temporal expression of this infinitude, the future of contemporary man's religiousness, in the face of some of the major forms of secularity that have been indicated here, lies ultimately only in the hope of a renewal of metaphysics (*Sophia Perennis et Universalis*, Transcendent Wisdom), of which theology, anthropology and sociology will be the expressions at appropriate levels and in diverse modes.

### III

This brief survey of the meanings and forms of secularism has endeavoured to show that autonomous humanism which, in the last analysis puts man in the centre of the universe and makes him the *telos* of history is the central and, so to say, the inevitable meaning of secularism; and that Gellner's neo-Episodic Theory of Progress represents a highly sophisticated form of secularism that is most destructive of all religious traditions. We have tried to show that the co-existence theory of secularism is logically untenable for it already involves a non-traditional definition of religions and, moreover, in practice it necessarily leads to one or the other form of autonomous humanism. This is also true of a form of secularism which India is supposed to have adopted. It is often called *sarva dharma samabhāva*, that is, equivalence of all religions and the State not recognizing the pre-eminence of any one religion. It is to be mentioned here that until the constitutional amendment of 1976 which was made during the emergency period, India had not been constitutionally proclaimed a Secular State though there have been, from the very beginning, a number of constitutional provisions and other legislative measures in the direction of secularism. Both jurists and social scientists have been divided on the precise nature of the Indian State with reference to secularism. This controversy has, of course, ended now with the inclusion of the word 'secular' in the Indian Constitution; no definition of the term has, however, been provided in the Constitution: *sarva dharma samabhāva* is not the constitutional definition of Indian secularism, though it does represent the most widely accepted view in political circles and is also favoured by leading and influential social scientists. It is not proposed to examine here this Indian version of the co-existence theory of secularism. It should be sufficient to remark that equivalence or equality of diverse religions traditions can mean merely a legally and politically postulated equality and hence necessarily limited to a circumscribed domain. From the standpoint of the religious traditions themselves, this equivalence or equality of religions must appear as a legal and political fiction, an "as if". Any such political stance can be very damaging to their inner vitality. If, however, an attempt was somehow made to go deeper into this idea of *sarva dharma samabhāva*, it would lead one to the transcendental (metaphysical) unity of all religions. This meaning is, however, wholly incompatible with secularism in any form, and, appearances to the contrary, radically in conflict with any

public policy that requires equal support to social expressions of all kinds of religions and indifference to religion as such.

In fact, it is the loss of the esoteric and metaphysical level of religions that might have been a major factor in their decay through sectarianism and eventual emergence of the secular (non-religious) world-view. This brings us once again to the contemporaneity theory of secularism and the notion of "secular theology". It has already been pointed out how the paradoxical notion of a secular theology is founded on the notion of contemporaneity and, we have also argued that it is inherently ambiguous. In concluding this essay, a brief elucidation of this point may be in order.

Concern with the eternal destiny of man should be *via* his life in time: this is the central idea of secular theology. From this perfectly sound idea, it does not follow that eternal truths should be adjusted to changing notions of a given age. It does not follow that the *modern* man is the measure of all things (to do so is not an application but a perversion of Protagoras' profound truth). Eternity is that Now to which the past and future are ever present; and this means that the "intrinsic nature of the Self is its present contemporaneity with whatever has been or will be".<sup>5</sup> It follows that our age has to be viewed under the aspect of eternity, then alone can we be contemporaneous with it.

The authentic idea of contemporaneity is related to human destiny in eternity, not to man's fate in each age. St. Thomas Aquinas says: "Fate lies in the created causes themselves." (*Summa theologiae*, 1. 116.2). "The deduction," comments Coomaraswamy, "will naturally follow that, to escape from fate, to be free, which is to fulfill one's destiny (reach one's destination, man's last end), one must have 'denied himself' and passed over from becoming to being."<sup>6</sup>

To make Christianity or Hinduism or any traditional religion, contemporary, "living", "engaged", "forward-looking", "open", etc., means essentially to make it once again a "freedom-giving", a "liberating force". And freedom really means the possibility that man can escape this fate and realize his destiny. To interpret *Sophia Perennis* as embodied in the Christian tradition in accordance with the notions of modern man (science and technology), to seek for a secular meaning of the Gospel, is precisely to be fatalistic and implies a decision to be less than human insofar as one does not fulfill one's destiny in Eternity. In other words, this elevation of one's temporal fate to one's ultimate destiny signifies precisely the loss of human freedom and dignity. For freedom lies in transcending fate and dignity in striving to be what one is, that is, realizing one's ultimate destiny.

Secular and Radical (Death of God) theologies are not as fashionable today as they were a decade or so ago. But the kind of intellectual response to the challenge of modernism they represent is not yet obsolete. Of course there are many strands in what may be broadly called secular theology. (In fact, it is often too broad a label.) There are elements in different schools of secular and radical theology which are true to the Christian tradition while giving us a contemporary formulation. It is our task to distinguish such formulations carefully and systematically from those that, in effect, seek to "modernize" traditional Christian ideas and principles.

Perhaps it is these modernizations of *Sophia Perennis* that are most dangerous; for they are the enemy within. Secular and radical theologies are close allies of Gellner's neo-Episodic theory of Progress. As we have already pointed out, the acceptance of this "modern" theory of Progress which claims to be at once

philosophical and scientific-technological, would mean the elimination of all religious traditions.

We have already argued that Gellner's theory represents in many ways the most sophisticated twist that could be given to secularism. There does remain perhaps a redeeming feature: the ironical stance implicit in Gellner's theory. In propounding his transitionalism — elevating “transition” to the position of an ‘ism’ (in itself a staggering idea), Gellner says: “It is useless to seek a foundation (for our morals) in the axioms of beetlehood or manhood for we are no longer beetles, and the nature of manhood happily is not rigidly determined.”<sup>7</sup> The sentence is superb in the depth of its irony and one is irresistibly reminded of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Secular and radical theologies which seek Eternity by modernizing it are founded on the belief that the nature of man is not “rigidly determined”, forgetting that in that case there can be no eternal destiny for man. Unlike the social scientist, however, the secular theologian cannot deny the idea of man's destiny, for he cannot spare the former's belief that the transition to industrialism is itself the ultimate destiny for contemporary man. Nor perhaps can he agree with Paul Valery: “Once destiny was an honest game of cards which followed certain conventions, with a limited number of cards and values. Now the player realizes in amazement that the hand of his future contains cards never seen before and the rules of the game are modified by each play.” If he agreed with such a view on its own terms, the theologian would discover before long that he had to deny eternity and abandon all theology, secular or otherwise. Secular and radical theologies that seek contemporaneity via “modernization” of the First Principles and the core myths thus represent secularisms in its most insidious form.

Those who believe in the eternal destiny of man and the saving power of the religious traditions have a twofold task today. Firstly, they have to identify and resist the myriad manifestations of the kind of mentality which is centred in the irreversibility (and irresistibility) of modernism and finds expression in such theories as neo-episodism and secular theology. Secondly, they have to show that to be contemporary, a religious tradition needs to be renewed not “modernised”, and that this renewal means recovery of roots and restoration to wholeness. Man to-day stands in supreme need of Repentance, a radical transformation of awareness. It is only with *metanoia* that previously “inoperative causes are brought into play, with new results.”<sup>8</sup>

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#### FOOTNOTES:

1. I am indebted to Professor Ronald G. Smith on whose excellent account in *Secular Christianity* I have based the historical survey of the concept of secularism given in the earlier part of this essay. Much of the work used in this essay was done during my tenure of a Visiting Lectureship at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Center's Director, Professor W. C. Smith.
2. R. N. Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science, Vol. 96, No. 1, p. 28.
3. Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965, pp. 4 and 42. See also especially pp. 3–5, 9, 40, 48, 73–4.

4. See his *Christianity in World History*, New York: Scribner's and Sons, 1964.
5. Ananda K. Commaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, Ascona, 1947, p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
7. Ernest Gellner, *op. cit.*, p. 73, parenthesis added.
8. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 50.