THE SITUATION FOR MODERN FAITH

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SINCE THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, sociologists have disagreed strongly on the question of the social nature and long-range prospects of religion.[1] Durkheim and de Tocqueville argue that religion is a sociological universal, functionally necessary for any well-ordered and healthy society.[2] In their view, the ultimate value-consensus on which societies necessarily rest derives from a sacred base. Marx and Freud saw religion as an illusion or ideology, part of the fiber of a system of personal or societal oppression. Religion is destined to wither away, to be replaced by a human and rational choice of foundational social values. On his part, Weber posited a "seemingly" irreversible trend of disenchantment by which the authority of charisma yields to technical rationality and utilitarian bureaucracy.[3]

In the twentieth century these disputes about the social role and future of religion continue unabated. It is possible to read, back to back, two apparently suasive sociological accounts arguing, in opposition, that religion is declining in modern society or, conversely, is more vigorous than ever. Theological prognoses of secularization as the situation for modern faith seem no less muddled and contradictory than those of sociologists.[4]

THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

One key to unraveling this conceptual muddle is found in the sociological debates about the secularization thesis; for this thesis purports to

[1] For a secondary treatment of classic sociology on the question of religion, cf Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (New York Paulist, 1975), Charles Glock and Phillip Hammond, eds, *Beyond the Classics* (New York Harper & Row, 1973), Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York Basic Books, 1966), Roland Robertson, "Individualism, Societalism, Worldliness, Universalism," *Sociological Analysis* 38 (1977) 281–306

[2] For Durkheim, cf *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York Collier, 1973), for de Tocqueville, cf *Democracy in America* 1 and 2 (New York Vintage, 1955), for an overview of de Tocqueville on religion and society, cf Doris Goldstein, *Trial of Faith* (New York Elsevier, 1975)

[3] For Weber, cf *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston Beacon, 1963) Robertson ("Individualism" 283) asserts, mistakenly it seems to me, that Weber unambiguously subscribed to the secularization thesis In his political writings Weber hoped for some new outburst of charisma, which he did not dismiss as a possibility, although he was characteristically pessimistic on the issue

[4] Besides Baum (n 1 above), cf for theological views of secularization James F Childress and David B Harned, eds, *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1970), and Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York Simon and Schuster, 1978) 59–64

deal with a social-science account of the situation for modern faith. In this article I attempt a review of the literature on secularization, drawing primarily on fifteen different sociological treatments. My purpose is twofold. The first is analytic. I try both to delineate the various dimensions and units actually involved in sociological claims for secularization and to suggest what kind of data would be necessary to establish the case. The first of these tasks tries to provide a lexicon of usage; the second provides a logic for argument. I also undertake an analysis of the conceptual overlap and cross-purposes of those who use the secularization concept, in an attempt to discover thereby any constants in assertions about the peculiarly modern situation for faith.

It will be my contention that the secularization thesis in sociology is neither a theory nor, properly, even *one* concept. It represents what David Martin has called "a hold-all" concept, hiding under its umbrella several logically discrete terms and resting on an appeal to "summative units" whose association with one another or with the status of religion in modern society is, at yet, largely untested and certainly not proven.[5] As Larry Shiner has asserted, "about the only thing that can be said with certainty of the concept of secularization is that one can seldom be certain of exactly what is meant by it.... As yet there is no agreement as to what meaning it should have in sociological theory."[6]

Some authors assert, in using the phrase, a quantum increase in irreligiosity and secularism. Others use the term as a synonym for alienation, Enlightenment emancipation, rationalization, desacralization of previously sacred areas of life, or privatization. Still others point to changes in the hierarchical control-mechanisms in modern society which diminish *direct* control by *organized* religion over other institutional spheres, although the over-all status of religion in society remains constant. Again, some sociologists assert that we may be witnessing the reversal of secularization due to "a second secularization," i.e., the desacralization of the taken-for-granted "secular" mythic world of everyday life.[7] While some sociologists define secularization in terms of belief systems, still others focus on organizational styles.[8] In the face of this

[5] Cf. David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular* (New York: Schocken, 1969) 4. A "summative unit," e.g., urbanization, is a nominal category for aggregate individual properties. The social-structure reference is left unstated in summative units, thus begging the question of the distinction between individual and societal properties.

[6] Larry Shiner, "The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (hereafter *JSSR*) 6 (1967) 207.

[7] Cf. Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974).

[8] For an organizational definition, cf. Kenneth Westhues, "An Elaboration and Test of a Secularization Hypothesis in Terms of an Open-Systems Theory of Organization," *Social Forces,* no. 3 (March 1971) 54–67.

equivocal usage, several sociologists have wisely entered the plea that the term should be dropped entirely.[9] Despite wide variation in usage, there are some areas of agreement about the situation for modern faith in those who support and those who oppose the secularization thesis. As Hans Mol puts it, "as a basic concept in the sociology of religion, secularization seems to be rather useless, but when it is related to a larger frame of reference, the concrete phenomena it appears to cover become more meaningful."[10]

My second purpose is to argue, on the basis of the constants uncovered in widely divergent usages and evaluations, that, to use the words of Huston Smith, "the sacred is not so much declining as shifting its locus."[11] Indeed, its shifting locus explains much of the sociological diversity in evaluating the status of religion in modern society. By a shift in locus, arguably there is more of the sacred in modern society than meets the eye, because it is lodged in new places.[12] Moreover, what appears to some as secularization can be explained as well by focusing on changing control-mechanisms in society at large rather than asserting an over-all diminution of the sacred. By exploring the shift in locus, I hope to capture some characteristic challenges to faith in the modern world. In order to facilitate this overview of usages on secularization, I will present two schematic charts (Tables 1 and 2) comparing authors on the issues involved in the debate on secularization and on their account of what is novel about the modern situation for faith as compared to previous eras.

I have been long aware that to enter the debate about the secularization thesis is to walk into a hornets' nest of contrary usage, definition, evaluation, and assumptions, both in sociological theory and in more general philosophic presuppositions. It is nearly impossible to sort out, let alone achieve a concordance among, varying usages of the term. I want, therefore, at the beginning to present some stipulated definitions, distinctions, and questions which seem necessary to make sense of this sociological view of the situation for modern faith.

Secularization, Secularism, Secularity

By "the secularization thesis" I mean a claim that there is a long-term process in modern society by which the quantum of the secular is

[9] Cf. David Martin, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization," in Julius Gould, ed., *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences 1965* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 169–82; also Peter E. Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularization* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

[10] Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Free Press, 1977) 29.

[11] Huston Smith, "Secularization and the Sacred," in Donald Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation 1969* (Boston: Beacon, 1969) 585.

[12] This is the contention of J. Millton Yinger, "A Structural Examination of Religion," *JSSR* 8 (1969) 88–99.

increasing in proportion to the quantum of the sacred. A mere increase in the quantum of the secular, in comparison to earlier periods, is not sufficient to count as secularization, especially if societies, by increasing division of labor, become more complex with many more units of rules, roles, relations, and institutions. In a situation of increasing complexity in social life, with many more interrelations, it is logically possible for the quantum of the secular to increase while the quantum of the sacred (a) actually declines, (b) remains stable or increases either at (c) a lesser, (d) similar, or (e) even greater rate than the increase of the secular. Only cases a, b, and c would count, in my understanding, as meaningful instances of secularization.

By "the secular" I mean "regions of life that man understands and controls, not necessarily completely but . . . for all practical purposes."[13] These are regions toward which humans adopt a basically utilitarian attitude of mastery and control, making judgments on the basis of the technical adequacy of means to achieve stipulated goals. By "the sacred" I mean the area of mystery—the incomprehensible, indomitable, and seriously and supremely important; for "the sacred exceeds not only our control but our comprehension."[14] Our characteristic attitudes toward the sacred are awe, celebration, participatory contemplation, and gratitude rather than mastery.

The sacred and the secular are not once-for-all fixed and completely separable domains. As Durkheim reminded us, almost anything can, in principle, count as the material embodiment of the sacred and, similarly, through a process of desacralization, return symbolically to the world of the profane. The reverse is also true. Again, what is conventionally labeled as secular may have for certain people religious significance, and vice versa. If it is of religious significance, they will define their situation in terms of ultimate values. The converse is also true. What is conventionally labeled as religious may have the quality of the secular. It should not come as a surprise to discover that traditional religious involvement serves merely instrumental ends for many people.[15]

Nor is the sacred and the secular coterminous with a dichotomy between the natural and supernatural (highly modern and Western terms) or that between the this-worldly and otherworldly. The crucial point is not that, under secularization, some acts or institutions are entirely worldly and others entirely sacred. The crucial point is that some limited aspect of any act or institution has sacred significance, the

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[13] Huston Smith, "Secularization" 583.
[14] Ibid. 587.
[15] Cf. Richard Fenn, "The Secularization of Values," *JSSR* 8 (1969) 122; Thomas O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 90 ff.

remaining aspects of any act or institution gaining their meaning primarily from their relevance for life in this world and age.[16]

An unresolved and seemingly unresolvable difference among sociologists who speak of secularization rests in varying definitions of what constitutes the religious. The major point of contention lies in exclusive vs. inclusive definitions of religion.[17] All examples of the former (e.g., belief in the supernatural or in a personal God) tend to be culture-bound, so restrictive in scope that they do not include conventionally accepted instances of religiosity such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Most inclusive definitions, on the other hand, are so flexible that there always tends to be religion wherever there is what Durkheim called "la vie sérieuse." The opposite of the religious becomes the absence of any interiority, the acceptance of the literalness of the everyday as the sole reality.[18] Inclusive designations of religion almost rule the secularization thesis out of court by definition. Moreover, the various exclusive or substantive definitions of the essence of religion are in simple contradiction.[19]

By "secularism" I mean "the denial that a sacred order exists, the conviction that the universe is in no meaningful sense an expression or embodiment of purpose, the belief that it is unreasonable, other than anthropomorphically, to have toward the universe or its 'ground' a relationship mediated by communication or by any other interchange of meanings—to have toward it a relationship in any sense interpersonal."[20] Secularism, like atheism, can be either intentional or practical. It can also be compartmentalized in isolated attitudes toward certain institutional sectors of society from which all religious concern is banished. The very usefulness of the concept of secularism as the polar opposite of the religious attitude becomes questionable, however, when it is alleged by some social scientists that it is "something very like religion."[21]

"Secularity" is a neutral term. It serves as a reference word for areas or aspects of life under direct human control or manipulation without particular regard for any sacred order. The direct relevance of a sacred order as such, or some indirect relevance to the area in question, or, finally, more direct impact of that order to other areas or aspects of life

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[16] For this point, cf Guy E Swanson, "Modern Secularity," in Cutler, *Religious Situation* 802

[17] For the issues involved in choosing between the two types of definition, cf Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N Y Doubleday, 1967) 175–79

[18] This is the account of Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York Harper & Row, 1970) 224

[19] This is the contention of Benton Johnson, "Sociological Theory and Religious Truth," *Sociological Analysis* 38 (1977) 386

[20] Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 803–4

[21] Will Herberg, "Religion in a Secularized Society," *Review of Religious Research* 8 (1962) 148

is not denied. Obviously, an increase in secularity is less of a head-on threat to the sacred than an increase in secularism. Nor does secularity assume the eventual demise of the sacred. Also, at least some transcendent religions assume radical distinctions between God and creation. They imply, thereby, a large area of the legitimately secular.

Has there been a proportionate quantum diminution of the sacred in modern society? The safest and most careful answer would assert that we do not know, since no sociological study has carefully defined and measured enough of the parameters of complex social life in a comparative time perspective. Moreover, we lack any careful measures of the relative quantitative presence of the sacred and secular in earlier historical periods. We simply do not have, at our present disposal, sophisticated data which cover sufficient indices of individual and social religiosity to allow us to assert, with any reliance on statistical probabilities or comparative historical data, either (1) that the quantum of the sacred has diminished over time, or (2) that the quantum of the sacred is decreasing at present in proportion to the secular. I am here strongly asserting that the secularization thesis is not only unproven but, at the present time, unprovable.[22]

Nevertheless, the question raised by the secularization thesis remains a good one. It seems intuitively evident that some societies are more religious than others and that a given society is more religious at one point of time than at others. It is not sufficient, as some sociologists do, to dismiss the secularization thesis by appealing to functional universals in anthropology and sociology. A phenomenon can be universally present without being a constant.[23]

The best accounts we presently have of current data on religiosity in Western societies, however, while insufficient to disprove the secularization thesis, rule out extreme versions of it. After a careful survey of evidence of church affiliation and individual religiosity and a comparison of religious and political commitments in the United States which shows that religious commitments are at least as strong as those in the arena of politics, Guy E. Swanson concludes: "I believe that the religious data require our being cautious indeed concerning assertions of the present irrelevance of religion for the personal lives and the institutional commitments of most Americans."[24]

[22] This is also the assertion of Charles Y. Glock in "Comment," *JSSR* 6 (1967) 30. Strangely, Glock has not shown the same modesty in his numerous published works which strongly assert the fact of secularization.

[23] For this caveat, cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 109. Both Bellah, *Beyond Belief,* and Andrew Greeley, *Unsecular Man* (New York: Schocken, 1972), seem to fall into the error of equating a universal with a constant.

[24] Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 813.

Several sociologists have pointed out that the secularization thesis is highly charged with ideological components. Thus, David Martin has remarked that it depends on a utopian evocation of some previous golden age, e.g., the Middle Ages, when, it is assumed, individuals or societies were highly religious.[25] Moreover, he asserts that the thesis postulates the existence of some master trend in history, which flies in the face of what we ordinarily know about human freedom, the unintended consequences of human action, and the ambiguity of historical causation. Sometimes the thesis gives disproportionate emphasis to some small stratum in society, i.e., the intelligentsia, as the key to the future. These assumptions need to be juxtaposed against "realistic accounts of western history since ancient times and with many ethnographic reports, all of them revealing a frequently casual observance of religious practices and doctrines."[26]

Robert Bellah has spoken of the secularization thesis as itself resting on the highly questionable and dated myths of the Enlightenment, which project inevitable progress, rationality, and total reliance on science.[27] Similarly, Philip Glasner asserts that the secularization thesis is not a scientific concept but rather a sociological myth. The concept is used ideologically "to legitimate myths about the decline in moral standards in contemporary life."[28] Hans Mol points to another ideological assumption in the thesis when he argues that the potential domain of science and rationality has strict limits. "Objective observation and strict canons of rationality and scepticism appear to be dysfunctional for individual and social identity." The signal failure of science to replace myth or religion as a sacralizing mechanism is due to "its demonstrable incapacity to anchor a comprehensive system of meaning emotionally."[29] Mol ridicules the arrogance and naive optimism of those who view religion as a dispensable element once science has solved all of life's problems. Implicit in this view are two highly questionable assumptions: (1) that all "problems" are of the order of mastery problems and that none are different-order problems of personal identity, interpretative meaning, and integration into a community; (2) that human problems are finite in number, such that science inevitably reduces the realm of the problematic. What if solutions to given problems by science unleash new and more complicated issues of contingency, bafflement, and uncertainty? The triumph of science could actually increase the potential realm of the sacred. The relation between the sacred and the secular need not be of a zero-sum quality.

[25] Martin, *The Religious and the Secular* 28.
[26] Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 810.
[27] Bellah, *Beyond Belief* 237–59.
[28] Glasner, *Sociology of Secularization* 9.
[29] Mol, *Identity* 126.

Religiosity and Organized Religion

It is a truism in comparative studies in the sociology of religion that the Western Christian understanding of an institutionally separate community or organization specializing in religious mediation is historically and culturally specific. Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam lack both churches and sects in the Western sense. It is crucial in discussing secularization to distinguish between religiosity (the sacred) and organized religion (institutional specialization in one sacred tradition by a distinct collectivity).

Even in the Western Christian case, "religiosity is a reality prior to and independent of religious organization."[30] Survey data show that a majority of the unchurched continue to believe, pray, experience the sacred, and engage in behavior they explicitly label as religious.[31] Indeed, J. Milton Yinger has devised measures of religiosity which show that respondents who turn out to be "highly secular" on conventional church-oriented measures, such as those of Charles Y. Glock and associates, are highly religious.[32]

Moreover, not all of the religiosity of members of organized religions is under the organizations' control. Church members adopt superstitions or private beliefs and practices at variance with church dogma and participate in "religions," e.g., ecumenism or the civil religion, alongside their membership in a given church. Evidence of a decline in membership in a society's organized religions or in those religions' influence on the wider culture and societal structures, while an important index of real religious change, is not thereby evidence of secularization. Sociologists who use church decline as a primary proof of secularization without attending to the extensiveness and growth-rates of new religions and nonchurch forms of religiosity simply bypass the crucial question whether the quantum of the sacred in modern society is decreasing in proportion to the secular. They should speak more carefully of a decline in the church rather than secularization.

Religiosity: The Individual; Social; Cultural; Institutional Religion

It is also important to distinguish measures of religiosity which relate to individual attitudes and behavior from measures testing the religiosity

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[30] Ibid. 168.

[31] Cf. Kenneth Briggs, "A New Voice for Religion," *New York Times,* Sunday, June 25, 1978, p. 8E; Garry Wills, "What Religious Revival?" *Psychology Today,* April 1978, pp. 74–81.

[32] Cf. Yinger, "Structural Examination of Religion." For Glock's measures of religiosity, cf., *inter alia,* Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965) 18–39; and Glock and Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper, 1966).

of social structures, cultures, and organized churches. As I will note in inspecting Table 1, few sociological studies of secularization cover this whole gamut. Well-constructed opinion polls and attitude surveys yield a roughly trustworthy measure of individual religiosity in any society. They do not, however, in themselves tell us how influential religion is for the social structure. Religion can be widespread among individuals in a society while insulated from any impact on political, social, and economic behavior. Hence, as Roland Robertson suggests, we must distinguish between the religiosity of individuals and the religiosity of the social system of which they are members.[33] An example will illustrate the point. While the Soviet Union is officially a secularist society, it contains about the same proportion of active church adherents as England. The Soviet Union is palpably more secular as a social system than England, though not in the aggregate measure of individuals. While aggregate statistics on the religiosity of individuals are necessary data to test the secularization hypothesis, they are not sufficient.[34]

Robertson signals the proper focus for studies of the comparative secularity of social systems: "We must pay attention to the structural and general characteristics of the system as a whole—the degree of differentiation and autonomy of religious sectors in relation to other social sectors, the strategic location or otherwise of religious bodies and leaders, the relationship between religious groups etc."[35] Robertson's project is ambitious. In carrying it out, there is a danger of selective focus on aspects of religiosity undergoing desacralization to the detriment of social shifts in the opposite direction. Undoubtedly, there are many aspects of life in the contemporary world in which the secular rather than the religious prevails. Few religious beliefs or practices are involved in the way we plant our crops, plan our economies, or treat our illnesses. On the other hand, some aspects of life are being desecularized. For example, many persons today are struggling, in what appear to be religious terms, with the question of the proper range of their loyalties. Lines of race and class and nation that formerly were taken for granted have become problematic. Much of the religious quest on these matters may be outside the traditional churches, but this should not lead us to overlook them.[36]

Robertson also insists on distinguishing between the degree of secularity of social structure and that of culture.[37] He argues that we must

[33] Roland Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* (New York Schocken, 1970) 56–57
[34] This is a special weakness of Swanson, "Modern Secularity," and Greeley, *Unsecular Man*
[35] Robertson, *Sociological Interpretation of Religion* 57
[36] J Milton Yinger makes this point in "Pluralism, Religion and Secularism," *JSSR* 6 (1967) 24
[37] Cf Robertson, *Sociological Interpretation of Religion* 60

always stipulate what aspect of religion we are talking about—the major distinction being that between cultural and social aspects. Religious functionaries can be extremely influential in a particular society (as political individuals, for example) without their influence involving the shaping of religious beliefs and values other than perhaps a general subservience to the idea of religion. In such a case it is clearly a social aspect of religion which is being scrutinized. On the other hand, in cases where political or economic decisions are strongly dictated by religious beliefs or values, then equally clearly it is a cultural aspect of religion which enjoys autonomy. The most complete case of religious influence would be that in which both cultural and social aspects of religion were synchronized and equally influential. Robertson's programmatic project for a careful study of social and cultural secularization has never really been systematically undertaken by any sociologist.[38]

A final measure of secularity vs. religiosity relates to the organized churches. Several sociologists speak of "the internal secularization" of institutional religion. By this they refer to "the forces whereby specific religious institutions and orientations themselves become part of and like the world."[39] In part, this reference to internal secularization of the church seems a ploy to account for the embarrassing contrary evidence of the secularization thesis, i.e., the vigor of American, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and, to a lesser extent, Dutch religion (the cases of denominational societies without an established church).[40] Those are summarily dismissed as inauthentic religion because it is alleged that they represent the transposition of secular, worldly values into religious guise. Thus, Bryan Wilson scorns the watered-down beliefs of American churches where the churches act as mere agencies for the expression of community feeling.[41] Thomas Luckmann asserts that while traditional church religion was pushed to the periphery of "modern" life in Europe, it became more modern in America by undergoing a process of internal secularization which denuded it of any strongly transcendent reference.[42]

Other measures of the "secularity" of the organized churches use as a criterion the degree of acceptance of traditionalist forms of belief and

[38] Besides Robertson's proposal, Richard Fenn has presented a careful definition of a possible meaning of secularization in "The Process of Secularization A Post-Parsonian View," *JSSR* 9 (1970) 117–36 Like Robertson, Fenn has not translated his conceptions into empirical research

[39] Mol, *Identity* 2

[40] An excellent account of the denominational society in the United States is available in Andrew Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glencoe, Ill Scott, Foresmann, 1972) For the Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand cases, cf Mol, *Identity* 25–26, 33, 191 I treat Dutch religion in my *The Evolution of Dutch Catholicism* (Berkeley University of California, 1978)

[41] Cf Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London Watts, 1966) 115

[42] Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York Macmillan, 1967) 36

practice. As Milton Yinger has remarked, this strategy simply finesses the serious problem of distinguishing between religious change and religious decline. Researchers who restrict themselves to traditionalist measures of belief and practice are likely to miss completely the more ephemeral, the emergent, and the poorly institutionalized species of religion.[43] From this perspective, the Protestant Reformation is, paradoxically, an instance of secularism; Conservative Judaism is secularism; Vatican Council II is secularism. This peculiarly misleading usage seems to confound a descriptive with an evaluative use of the concept of secularization.

Still other sociologists appeal to the internal secularization hypothesis as a way to explain the explosive growth of conservative evangelical sects and the comparative decline of the mainline churches.[44] Again, while this shift represents important religious change, it is by no means evident that the loss of members and influence is a fair index of the loss of the sense of the sacred in the mainline Protestant churches.[45] It seems wiser to see the church-sect difference, as Troeltsch did, not so much as an index of religiosity vs. secularity as simply variant forms of being religious. It is sometimes alleged that by "compromise" with the world, mainline churches gain apparent secular relevance at the price of serving as ideological props for the societal *status quo*. It is not clear, however, that otherworldly religion, built around the worship of the sacred, is by reason of its otherworldliness any the less capable of ideological distortion.[46] Again, there is no consistency, among those who speak of internal secularization, about whether the primary causal thrust for secularization comes from forces within or without the churches. Some sociologists, such as Peter Berger, see a master trend which emasculates any strong religious identity except that of sectarian religious groups capable of generating alternative plausibility structures to the secular.[47] Others, such as Dean Kelley, place primary focus on the churches' own sell-out to worldly values.[48]

Perhaps more than any other usage, references to the internal secularization of the churches shows the rubbery catch-all character of the concept. David Martin captures the inherent difficulties in such use when he remarks on "the difficulty of interpreting declines in religious practices when these practices can be viewed as either religiously indifferent or

[43] Yinger, "Structural Examination of Religion" 90.

[44] This is the usage in Wilson, *Religion,* and in Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[45] Jeffrey Hadden objects strongly to using growth or decline in membership as an index of secularization in *Gideon's Gang* (Philadelphia: United Church, 1974).

[46] This point is tellingly made in Baum, *Religion and Alienation* 144.

[47] Cf. Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 127–54.

[48] Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing.*

religiously negative or else as empirically rooted in conventionality. . . .
There is the fact that the height of ecclesiastical power can be seen either
as the triumph of the religious or its most blasphemous secularization."[49]

FOUR DIVERGENT MAPS OF SECULARIZATION

It should now be clear why I earlier contended that secularization is
not properly one sociological concept. It can refer to either secularism or
secularity. It points to religious change as well as religious decline and
sometimes confuses the two. It shifts from the descriptive to the evalua-
tive. It tends to jumble analysis at the level of individual religiosity and
the cultural, social-structural, and institutional levels. I want, next, to
substantiate from the literature that the secularization thesis does not
merit the title of coherent theory. In this section I will focus on four very
divergent maps of secularization, each purporting to deal with long-range
trends which affect the situation for modern faith. To do so, I will draw
upon the writings of Bryan Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, Talcott Parsons,
and Andrew M. Greeley.

Map 1: The Asymptotic Demise of Religion

The classic or strong version of the secularization thesis argues that
the sacred is irreversibly declining in modern society under the combined
onslaught of urbanization, technology, modern society, empiricism, in-
creased levels of education, and the spread of belief in rationality. These
"summative units" remain largely nominal categories, evocative names
for aggregate individual changes. Little structural analysis accompanies
the evocation of the summative unit. Little attention is usually given to
contrary evidence of disproportionate rural declines of church adherence
or the higher levels of church membership correlated with increased
educational status.[50]

There are at least three very different mythic underpinnings for the
claim of the inevitable decline of the sacred. The first derives from the
Comtean positivist view of a historical evolution by which religion and
metaphysics yield to a philosophy of progress based on science, technol-
ogy, and liberal democracy. A second mythic foundation, associated with
disciples of Freud and Marx, assumes that religion is best understood as
a symptom of human alienation. Rudolf Siebert summarizes this position,
available in the critical sociology of the Frankfurt School: "Concerning
the future, the critical sociologists predict the end of religion in a com-

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[49] Martin, The Religious and the Secular 55.

[50] In Portugal, irreligion is found more strongly in rural than urban areas; cf. Mol, Identity
84. In the Netherlands the greatest, earliest defections from the Church occurred in rural
Friesland and Groningen. In the United States, especially among Catholics, an increase in
education increases religiosity; cf. Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 807-8.

pletely secularized society, with little chance for a restoration in a more concrete and truer form in a just society."[51] A final mythic version of decline, usually associated with Max Weber, is rooted in the late-nineteenth-century German middle-class pessimistic ideology of the decline of culture and spirit in the face of modern technique and civilization.[52]

The strongest empirical case for the asymptotic demise of religion is found in the works of British sociologist Bryan Wilson, who stands in the Comtean positivist tradition. In a 1966 book, *Religion in Secular Society,* relying mainly on British statistics, Wilson argued that secularization is a nonideological fact, i.e., "the fact that religion—seen as a way of thinking, as the performance of particular practices, and as the institutionalization and organization of these patterns of thought and action—has lost influence."[53] To establish his claim, Wilson juxtaposes an array of statistics demonstrating the decline of church attendance in England. The English church has fewer Sunday-school attenders, fewer full-time workers, less control over communications media, education, and politics than it did in the nineteenth century. Wilson also demonstrates that religion becomes less important as the life cycle unfolds, with fewer first communicants than baptized, and fewer confirmands than first communicants.[54]

Wilson sees denominational diversity and ecumenism as reactive but ineffective counterforces to secularization. Thus, "denominational diversity has in itself promoted a process of secularization, in creating institutionalized expression of social differences and divisions, in providing for the uncommitted a diversity of religious choice and in the very circumstance which, in extending choice, allows some to make no choice at all."[55] As for ecumenism, Wilson contends that "organizations amalgamate when they are weak rather than when they are strong, since alliance means compromise and amendment of commitment."[56]

Besides appealing to statistics on individual religiosity, Wilson addresses the social influence of religion. He shows how religious issues have become marginal with the institutional segregation of religion from the spheres of law, medicine, economics, education, etc. Moreover, the clergy are no longer arbiters of public taste and morals. As a profession,

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[51] Rudolf Siebert, "Religion and Critical Sociology," in Gregory Baum and Andrew Greeley, eds., *The Church as Institution* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974) 65.

[52] Cf. Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1969).

[53] Wilson, *Religion* xi.

[54] This same contention, that religion appeals to the marginal and deprived, is found in Charles Glock *et al., To Comfort and to Challenge* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967).

[55] Wilson, *Religion* 30.

[56] Ibid. 126.

the clergy in England show a marked status decline in comparison with their nineteenth-century status and that of other professions. Indeed, "even in their pastoral functions the clergy may be said to have lost influence, and to have been transformed, by the growth of specialists in social work, into amiable amateurs."[57]

Wilson rejects any notion of unchanging religious needs and functions. He thinks modern society is more rational than earlier societies, such that belief in the power of the supernatural (Wilson's definition of religion) and commitment to the supernatural are declining. The idea that humans can consciously change the character of society and the conditions of life has become pervasive in the modern world. With an increased emphasis on change, the source of societal values has shifted from the past (i.e., tradition and religion) to the present and future. This future orientation of modern society is the major cause of the decline in the institutions of religion and the eroding of their content.

In a more recent book, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion,* Wilson reiterates these claims about secularization.[58] In a reply to critics who claimed that the earlier book too facilely equated religion with the church, Wilson devotes the bulk of his book to new religious movements in the West and in the Third World. He sees these movements in the West as merely a type of leisure activity, with little significance for the social system. They also pursue rather secular ends. They focus on the here-and-now or present pleasure, seeking redemption of self, by self, for self. New religious movements in the Third World, largely native derivatives of Western ascetic religions, introduce and promulgate values conducive to modernization. These religious movements in the Third World are potentially significant forces in bringing about a transformation of their host societies. In the long run, however, that transformation will be in the direction of an increasingly rationally-constructed environment. The religious movements in the Third World, analogous to Weber's Protestant ethic, are ushering in a process which will lead to their own demise.

The key to understanding the Wilson map for the long-range asymptotic decline in religion lies in his assertion that, as humans increasingly live in a rationally constructed social world, they develop a pervasive rational, empirical orientation to the world which stands in contradiction with the nonrational, nonempirical religious sphere of life. The result is that religion has increasingly a weaker influence in the lives of modern humans. The only significant factor contributing to the transformation of religion is secularization itself. Ecumenism, charismatic renewal, volun-

[57] Ibid 51.
[58] Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

tary destructuration of churches, rationalization in church cartels, and ecumenical eclecticism are various religious responses to secularization. None is an effective counterforce. Wilson explicitly draws upon the Comtean evolutionary perspective in concluding: "That is part of the evolutionary process. Religions are always dying. In the modern world it is not clear that they have any prospect of rebirth."[59]

Wilson's work can be faulted on several scores. His indices of individual religiosity are entirely derived from membership in churches or sects. He neglects unorganized religion. He confines his definition of religiosity to belief in and commitment to the supernatural, thereby foreclosing any careful study of "secular" faiths and institutions which perform sacralizing functions similar to churches. He entirely overlooks the cultural dimension of religion.[60] His English data can be explained by alternative hypotheses related to the general inertia and inflexibility of established national churches in providing sacred identities for emerging classes and new religious needs.[61] This hypothesis has the merit of accounting for the vigor of religion in denominationally diverse societies without engaging in sleight-of-hand tricks which view these religions as actually a species of secularism.

Wilson's sweeping assessment of new religious movements as promoters of complete self-indulgence does not stand up when weighed against other studies of new religions in the West. He is not very careful in defining what counts for him as "socially significant" religion. He is unaware of new forms of religion which introduce strong novel versions of worldly asceticism (e.g., Zen) or combine asceticism, mysticism, and utilitarian consequential thought in strikingly new combinations and moral logics.[62] If his claim for substantiating the secularization thesis seems unwarranted, Wilson's data indicates that some profound transformations of contemporary religion have occurred which alter the situation for modern faith. We can tease these out without resorting to language about secularization.

Map 2: The Privatization of Religion

A second map for understanding secularization is available in the works of Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger. Both authors employ the con-

[59] Ibid. 70.

[60] For a view of British culture as sacred, cf. Edward Shils and M. Michael Young, "The Meaning of the Coronation," *Sociological Review* 1 (1953) 63–81.

[61] Cf. Mol, *Identity* 83.

[62] For evidence on new religions, cf. Charles Glock and Robert Bellah, *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977); Robert Wuthnow, *The Consciousness Reformation* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977). An important study of new moral logics is contained in Stephen Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (unpublished dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1977).

cept of secularization, although Berger seems to have changed his mind recently on whether the process of secularization is an inevitable by-product of modernization, as he earlier contended.[63]

In his influential book *The Invisible Religion,* Luckmann distinguishes varying levels of religiosity. His analysis is primarily cultural rather than social-structural. Luckmann denies that the secularization thesis applies to individual religiosity, since every human is faced with the task of transcending biological determinism by forming a self with an identity. This process entails reference to a scheme of meaning and community which relates to the cosmos. In a strongly inclusive definition of religion, Luckmann sees "the social processes that lead to the formation of self as fundamentally religious."[64] While religious institutions are not universal, the phenomena underlying them and which they organize are. By essence and definition, man is *homo religiosus.*

Employing an evolutionary typology, Luckmann postulates three social stages of religion: (*a*) pervasive cultural religion—paganism; (*b*) special-ized religion—classic Christianity; (*c*) retreating Christianity—seculari-zation. Using church statistics from Western Europe, Luckmann contends that church-oriented religion is on the periphery of modern society. Church members are predominantly rural rather than urban, female rather than male, the very young and very old rather than those in life's prime. Indeed, "the degree of involvement in the work processes of modern industrial society correlates negatively with the degree of involve-ment in church-oriented religion."[65]

In an earlier period Christianity displaced a social form of religion which permeated all social institutions. By an institutional specialization of religion in the church, Christianity articulated an "official model" of societal religion which, while in potential opposition to society, generally provided the agreed-upon moral norms for social life. In contemporary society the church has lost moral control over the state or economic system, which are regulated by autonomous institutionalized ideologies unrelated to any overarching and transcendent normative system. While sufficient for social life, these specialized and sheerly plural normative systems do not work for individuals in their quest for personal meaning and ultimate significance.

The effective social base for modern sacred meanings is no longer anchored in a pervasively religious culture or in the institutionalized specialization of religion in a church which provides the primary social form of religion. In relation to the social order, the church has become

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[63] Compare *The Sacred Canopy* with his "Second Thoughts on Substantive vs Func-tional Definitions of Religion," *JSSR* 13 (1974) 125–33

[64] Luckmann, *Invisible Religion* 49.

[65] Ibid. 30.

privatized. "The validity of her norms became restricted to a specifically religious sphere, while the global claims of 'the official' model were generally neutralized as mere rhetoric."[66] There is a new social form of religion in modern society. The primary public institutions neither maintain nor reflect the sacred cosmos. Neither does the church. Instead, individuals have direct access to an eclectic assortment of religious beliefs and rituals in secondary institutions of religious consumerism. The modern situation of religion is like a giant supermarket, with unlimited consumer choice. Religion is increasingly concerned only with issues of the private sphere: sexuality, familism, and self-realization.

Luckmann contends that in modern industrial societies there simply is no overarching culture. Modern societies do not stand in any need of legitimation. Technical rationality, which governs the primary public institutions, is beyond the need of any ideology or justification. Such sheer anarchic pluralism at the cultural level, as opposed to earlier sacral normative systems, represents cultural secularization. The extreme, even absolute, autonomy of the primary public institutions such as economic structures, the polity etc., unrelated to official social models of religion, represents social secularization. The church itself, by losing control or even important influence over the primary public institutions, turns to the private sphere. While individual religiosity by definition remains constant, religion ceases to have public impact. In Luckmann's argument, secularization is equivalent to privatization.

There are important differences between Luckmann and his sometime colleague Berger, especially on the issue of choosing between inclusive and exclusive or functional vs. substantive definitions of religion.[67] Nevertheless, most of Berger's sociological analysis of religion parallels Luckmann's. Berger agrees that modern societies lack any single overarching culture. He also shares the view that there is a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of social reality. He tends, like Luckmann, to see secularization as a linking-concept between radical pluralism (the cause), which confronts the modern world with the vertigo of relativism, and the privatization of religion (the outcome), which robs religion of social impact. Religion has become the affair of subjective consumer preferences, a private matter. It is either public rhetoric or private virtue. "Insofar as religion is common it lacks 'reality' and insofar as it is 'real' it lacks commonality."[68] While Berger concurs with Luckmann in explicitly asserting the internal secularization of much of organized religion, he is more agnostic than Luckmann on the question whether the secularization thesis applies to individual religiosity, although in more recent work Berger is inclined to suspect that much

[66] Ibid. 90.   [68] Ibid. 134.
[67] Cf. Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 176.

religious experience remains with us, even if "hidden in brown paper wrappers."[69]

Neither Luckmann nor Berger is an empirical sociologist in any strong sense. Both assert sweeping generalizations about historical processes and the desacralization of culture and social structure without any careful comparative study of selected elements of both. They neglect important contrary evidence to their thesis. Neither of the two authors has engaged in any field work connected with new religions or written extensively on them. Neither has conducted attitude surveys on individual religiosity which focused on unconventional forms of religion. Nor have they undertaken any studies of change in particular churches to substantiate their claims of internal secularization. They may, paradoxically, be indulging in rhetoric when in highly evaluative language they dismiss public religion as mere rhetoric.

Berger's and Luckmann's assertion that modern industrial societies simply lack overarching systems of meaning, legitimation, and value is sharply contested by most other students of modern society. Moreover, in his substantive definition of religion, Berger includes evaluative theological judgments which tend to equate religiousness with otherworldliness. Asceticism and mysticism are the dominant polarities in his understanding of religion. Berger seemingly forsakes his master, Weber, who insisted that one must sharply distinguish two different orientations on each of these polarities: otherworldly and innerworldly. If he followed Weber in this, Berger would not be able to speak so easily of the secularization of theology merely because it purports to deal with human experience as a locus for theology.[70] Luckmann's and Berger's is a different map of secularization than Wilson's, since they deny any asymptotic decline of individual religiosity—indeed, strongly in Luckmann's case, any decline at all. The best judgment of their map would seem to be that, while intellectually intriguing, in the absence of carefully specified data we cannot be sure that there is any terrain in the real world which it describes.

Map 3: The Transposition of Religion into the Secular Realm

The third map of secularization is available in the influential, if unsystematic, treatment of religion by Talcott Parsons. In a sense, Parsons radically inverts the secularization thesis by claiming that, far from being more secular, the modern world is more religious than before. In an

[69] Berger, "Second Thoughts" 132.

[70] Cf. Peter Berger, "A Sociological View of the Secularization of Theology," *JSSR* 6 (1967) 3–16, and his application of this paradigm to the work of David Tracy, Langdon Gilkey, and Schubert Ogden in "Secular Theology and the Supernatural," *TS* 32 (1977) 39–57.

important essay, "Christianity and Modern Industrial Society," Parsons contends that what has occurred in the West is not secularization in the sense of a diminution of the influence of religious values on society, but "differentiation" and, indeed, the "Christianizing" of society. For Parsons, the crucial claim is that "the institutionalization of Christian ethics has become part of the structure of society itself."[71]

Relying heavily on his own interpretative reading of Max Weber, Parsons contends that the most important change from the vantage point of society wrought by the Protestant Reformation was the endowment of secular life with a new order of religious legitimation as a distinctive field of Christian opportunity. The characteristically modern ideas of individualism, egalitarianism, professional specialization as a service orientation to clients, and democracy find their single most influential root in the Protestant understanding of the sanctity of individual conscience and the sacred vocation of work in and transformation of the social order. In eschewing hierarchical churches, Protestantism transformed the control mechanism from external authoritarian control of behavior to internalization. When compared to medieval Catholicism, Protestantism, especially Calvinism, expected more rather than less of larger numbers of Christians in their worldly lives.

Rather than seeing "secularization" as a moral and religious decline or collapse, Parsons suggests that it involves instead the transposition of religious values into the secular realm, such that formerly specific Christian attitudes, e.g., the dignity of individual conscience, care for the poor, and egalitarian élan, became widely available, in secular guise, as the moral bases of modern industrial society. In this view, modern Western culture, far from being secular, is anonymously Christian.

By differentiation, Parsons refers to the differentiation of the religious organization from secular society in the institutional separation of church and state. He notes that the loss of direct control over society by the church entails the religious enfranchisement of the individual, who is freed of detailed moral tutelage by the clergy. This differentiation of lay responsibility from ecclesiastical tutelage sets the stage for a new understanding of the primacy of moral action in the world as an instrument of the divine will and a concomitant upgrading of secular callings on a plane of moral equality with the religious life itself. As a result of the successful institutionalization of worldly vocations of service, in the professions especially, "in a whole variety of respects modern society is more in accord with Christian values than its forebears have been."[72]

Where Berger and Luckmann see religious pluralism as the loss of

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[71] Talcott Parsons, "Christianity and Modern Industrial Society," in Childress and Harned, *Secularization* 43.
[72] Ibid. 64.

common culture and a species of relativism and secularization, Parsons argues for the emergence of a higher-level religious consensus in what Robert Bellah later called "the civil religion," i.e., "a common matrix of value-commitment which is broadly shared between denominations and which forms the basis of the sense in which the society as a whole forms a religiously based moral community."[73] Where Berger and Luckmann argue for the privatization of organized religion, Parsons asserts that the voluntary churches become the indispensable training grounds for the social character necessary for societal tolerance, mutual responsibility, and civic trust. Without them a civil consensus based on virtue and not force or oppression would be impossible. Greater individual autonomy would spell the collapse of the social order, were it not rooted in a strong sense of communal responsibility. He sees this sense of responsibility as a product of "the mutuality inherent in Christian ethics, subject to a commonly binding set of norms and values."[74]

For Parsons, the privatization of religion points more to the fact that in modern societies individuals associate with the church of their own choice than to loss of functional importance for maintaining the main patterns of society. Religion, particularly church religion, remains indispensable for modern society, although it no longer has a direct linkage with, or control over, the polity or economy. Nor does the church enjoy a religious monopoly. Parsons compares the differentiation of religion with that of the family. Both institutions have lost some traditional functions. By institutional specialization, however, both have intensified other functions. Neither seems destined to wither away. Arguably, both bear a greater burden than previously, when they shared with other societal institutions some of the functions in which they now specialize.

Parsons sets the secularization thesis on its head, then, by claiming that modern Western societies are more "Christian" than their earlier versions. The sacred does not so much diminish as shift its locus: (a) from institutional specialization by an established church to a wider societal moral consensus based on values which derive from religious sources; (b) from hierarchical and clerical control to lay autonomy in the secular sphere; (c) from a diffuse and unspecialized sphere of organized religion to intense specialization in generating motivation, character-identity, and voluntary community; (d) from a state official religion to denominational pluralism.

Parsons is no more an empirical sociologist in the strong sense than Berger or Luckmann, although he has widely collaborated in empirical studies and field work. His map, no less than theirs, needs much more

[73] Ibid. 73. For Bellah's essay on "Civil Religion in America," cf. *Beyond Belief* 168–86.
[74] Parsons, "Christianity" 67.

careful definition of the parameters of social and cultural sacralization and testing in controlled study before it can legitimately evince widespread plausibility. Parsons' inclusive definition of religion is even broader than Luckmann's, since he sees religion as both an individual and societal, functionally universal, imperative. When parsed into its component parts, Parsons' map of secularization asserts that culture is no less religious than before, although its religious content is more universal and general than that of previous, particularist religions. Nor are the churches the exclusive carriers of the religious culture. As the social structure undergoes differentiation and institutional specialization, it too remains no less sacred than before. The control hierarchy in society is shifted to yield greater autonomy for religious actors (both individuals and collectivities) and a less direct, but no less salient, public role for the churches. Parsons also sees ways in which individuals, outside the direct influence of the churches, are nonetheless importantly religious through their internalization of societal values of religious origin. What Parsons' analysis makes evident is that the secularization thesis in sociology is not one coherent theory but several theories with only minimal or, at best, weak family resemblances with one another.

Map 4: The Persistence of the Sacred and Its Emergence in New Sites

Andrew M. Greeley's *Unsecular Man* is probably the best-known attempt to rebut the secularization thesis. Greeley's primary argument is that the basic human religious needs and the basic religious functions have not changed in any notable way since the dawn of historical life.[75] Whatever changes have occurred make religion more rather than less important. Greeley lists five permanent functions of religion: (*a*) it provides a system of ultimate meaning for humans who are by nature meaning-seeking animals; (*b*) it provides a sacralization of identity in collectivities which contribute a strong sense of belonging; (*c*) it helps to integrate the problematic and potentially disruptive area of human sexuality; indeed, "an attempt to endow sex with religious meaning is inevitable in the human condition";[76] (*d*) religion facilitates intimate contact with mystical powers; (*e*) religions provide collectivities with leaders who help to interpret the baffling, the chaotic, ethical paradox, and the mysterious. Each of these permanent functions corresponds to basic human needs. As Greeley sees it, "man will no longer need a 'faith' only when he has evolved beyond the experience of bafflement."[77]

[75] Bellah makes a similar claim in the essay "Religious Evolution," in his *Beyond Belief* 20–45

[76] Greeley, *Unsecular Man* 176

[77] Ibid 83

Greeley launches out against the various myths which underpin the secularization thesis. He is critical of those who claim that the present generation is the hinge of history, as well as those who contend that history exhibits any unilateral master trends. He debunks the exaltation in popularized sociology or theology of so-called secular man, technological man, religionless man, temporary man. He also scores those who use normative definitions of pure religion in order to justify claims of internal secularization; for "it is simply not true to say that religion which is associated with and reinforced by social pressures is not authentic religion. It is the only kind of religion man has ever known."[78] Indeed, "all religion is cultural, all religion involves social forces, and all religion labors through the difficulty of being something less than authentic."[79] Relying on the foregoing premises, Greeley interprets the vigor of American religion as a result of a strong need for self-definition and social location in a radically pluralistic society rather than as a sign of some internal evisceration of the religious impulse.

Greeley concedes that there is some validity to the contention of the secularization thesis that the situation for modern faith is different from that of earlier epochs. The changes that count involve privatization, rationalization, and individualization. They imply not the asymptotic demise of religion but the fact that "man is far more personally involved in choosing his religious values than before."[80] But the necessity of interpretation and choice does not make individuals any less religious than before. Indeed, Greeley enters a strong claim that this necessity makes religion more important than it has ever been before.

There are five major historical changes which situate faith in the modern world: (a) Privatization: religion has no direct influence over the large corporate structures which have emerged in the last four hundred years—big government, big business, big labor, big military, and big education. (b) Rationalization: a considerable displacement has occurred of religious interpretations of phenomena by rational science. (c) Rationalization: while humans cannot live without myths, the myths must now be interpreted. (d) Explicitation: religion is now a more explicit and rational matter. (e) Individualization: religion is much more a question of personal choice than in earlier eras.[81] Moreover, one must make important religious decisions without any strong corporate or cultural support system.

Greeley's map of long-range trends in religion argues for the persistence

[78] Ibid. 148.
[79] Ibid. 7.
[80] Ibid. 52.
[81] Ibid. 14–15.

of the sacred and, indeed, its emergence in new areas outside the monop-
oly of organized religion. It is possible for specific forms of organized
religion to evidence severe declines.[82] He cites the phenomena of new
religions to justify his basically anthropological thesis of an unsecular
man. With Huston Smith, Greeley contends that more of the sacred
persists than meets the eye; that what remains of the sacred is durable,
sufficiently so that it is not likely to decline much further; that the sacred
is likely to make a comeback. Besides its persistence, the sacred appears
in new apertures: in the unconscious, in experiences which are noetic but
ineffable, in new depths of meaning and intimacy in interpersonal rela-
tions.

While Greeley's case is a powerful and effective rebuttal of strong forms
of the secularization thesis, it does not actually refute all versions of the
thesis. Because he relies almost entirely on statistics related to individual
religiosity and claims based on individual anthropology, Greeley estab-
lishes the persistence of the sacred and suggests its emergence in new
forms of individual religiosity. He skirts somewhat the question of the
comparative secularity of social systems and cultures. Nor is it enough to
point to functional universals in these areas. Universally present social
phenomena, e.g., greed, sex, altruism, etc., vary in extensiveness and
intensity. It would be possible to accept Greeley's argument fully and still
make a limited claim in a weak form of the secularization thesis that at
the level of the social system or culture the quantum of the secular has
increased in proportionately greater degrees than that of the sacred. In
yielding that there is some truth to privatization, rationalization, and
individualization, Greeley even suggests that this could be the case. He
does not directly address the Berger-Luckmann contention that modern
societies are in no need of an overarching legitimation system, although
his claim that individuals have little social support for making critical
religious choices would seem to accept this contention in part. Certainly
Greeley has shown little sympathy for the Parsonian-Bellah counterclaim
to Berger and Luckmann which insists on a general, more universal
religiously-animated culture in the civil religion.

The four divergent maps of secularization show little immediately
apparent family resemblance to one another. Not only is the seculariza-
tion thesis unproven (also not disproven); it is in no coherent sense one
theory. In the following section I present two tables comparing fifteen
authors on their usage of the concept. My main interest lies in Table 2,
the account of what has changed in the situation for modern faith.

[82] As Greeley argues for American Catholicism in a book with William McCready and
Kathleen McCourt, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (Kansas City: Sheed and
McAndrews, 1976).

THE CONSTANTS IN CLAIMS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Table 1 is a summary of the positions of fifteen authors on issues related to the secularization thesis. The issues are: (1) the extent of true secularism; (2) an assessment of individual religiosity; (3) an assessment of social-structural religiosity; (4) an assessment of the religiosity of cultures; (5) an assessment of the influence of organized religion on society; (6) recognition of ideological components in the secularization thesis. The table employs six indicative signs: (1) a + indicates that the author thinks the phenomenon of secularization is increasing in the area noted; (2) a − means the author thinks the phenomenon is decreasing; (3) a O indicates an assessment of constancy, neither growth nor decline; (4) a blank space in any box indicates that the author does not explicitly deal with the issue; (5) a ? indicates that the author is ambiguous in his assessment of comparative secularity vs. religiousness; (6) an X in the box indicating awareness of ideological elements in the secularization thesis means the author takes note of the difficulties in the concept.

Since most of the authors treated in Table 1 have been discussed at some length, it is unnecessary to summarize their views more fully here. It is worth noting that in column A a majority of the authors dismiss true secularism as a key issue. Greeley insists that it is found only among a few intellectual elites. Robertson suggests it is not as widespread as one should expect from the secularization thesis.[83] Swanson shows that the empirical evidence indicates that only a small minority of adults in the most advanced countries have adopted a clearly secularist position. He also addresses head-on the claim that this small minority represents some leading edge in society: the better educated, the more prosperous, the young, the better-educated young, and the scientific and managerial and political elites. At least in the United States "no such regular trends appear: unbelief is distributed essentially at random with respect to age, education, and occupation."[84] At least one study in Metropolitan Detroit destroys all received stereotypes about secularism: "First generation immigrants, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, are more likely than the general population to be atheists, agnostics, or just doubters; among whites, men and women of either faith are more likely to be secularists if both they and their parents are or were unskilled laborers."[85] Clifford Geertz remains somewhat uncertain on the issue of secularism, since "the anthropological study of religious non-commitment is non-existent."[86]

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[83] Robertson, *Sociological Interpretation of Religion* 240 Robertson is generally cautious, he refuses to rule out the possibility of new religious forms emerging

[84] Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 807

[85] Ibid 808

[86] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* 109

TABLE 1

	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Secularism	Individual Secularization	Social Secularization	Cultural Secularization	Institutional Decline	Ideology
1 Andrew Greeley	0	0	?	0	?	X
2 Huston Smith	0	0	+			X
3 Guy E. Swanson	0	0	0			X
4 Clifford Geertz	?	0		0		
5 Roland Robertson	0	+	?	?	+	X
6 Bryan Wilson	+	+	+	+	+	
7 Robert Bellah	0	0	0	0	?	X
8 Peter Berger	+	?	+	+	+	
9 Gerard Lenski		0	0			
10 Thomas Luckmann	+	0		+	+	
11 Thomas O'Dea	+	0	+	+	+	
12 David Martin	0	0				X
13 Hans Mol	0	0	?	0	?	X
14 Talcott Parsons	0	0	−	0	?	X
15 Charles Glock	+	+			+	

The overwhelming majority of authors in column B deny the secularization thesis at the level of individual religiosity. It is worth noting that those who accept it also greatly stress the issue of institutional decline of the organized churches, perhaps an indication of their conflating of religiosity with church-oriented religion. Most of the authors accept some version of the thesis that religion is phenomenologically an anthropological universal.[87] Peter Berger's ambivalence on this issue lies more in his insistence on an exclusive, substantive definition of religion for the purposes of social science than in any great divergence from the phenomenological anthropology of other authors such as Luckmann.

In column C there is no clear pattern of claims about secularization of social systems as such. Greeley's ambiguity may derive from the fact that he does not treat of social-system properties in any detailed way. He yields, however, that religion has no direct influence on primary social institutions. In fact, only three of the authors treat of social-system aspects at some length: Wilson, Parsons, and Mol. As we have seen, Wilson conflates religiosity with church religion, and Parsons, almost uniquely, claims that Western social systems are less secular than in earlier periods. Mol is the most enlightening of all the authors in his

[87] For a good treatment of religion as a phenomenological universal, cf. Thomas O'Dea, *Sociology of Religion* 25–40.

dealing with the issue of secularization and social systems. He defines religion, functionally, as the sacralization of identity. He postulates two coequal human and social needs: the need for technical adaptation and differentiated mastery; the need for integration and identity. Religion addresses itself primarily to the latter, although it has some shaping role in modifying or stabilizing new technical adaptations. Mol insists that change must always be embedded in order. Change never occurs without some dialectic with stability. Religion is like the oyster: it responds to external stimuli of change for the sake of survival. Its response is not purely reactive, however, since by producing something new under external stimulus to change it contributes independently to the whole system of which it is a part.[88] In this, Mol is simply paraphrasing Weber's position.

Mol contends that religion has greater affinities with subsystems of the social structure which are also closely related to integration and identity, such as legitimating ideologies, class, status, family, and ethnic groups. In relation to these, religion remains constant or even increases its influence in modern societies. To substantiate his point, Mol appeals to evidence which indicates that religion flourishes precisely in those societies which are most fluid and pluralistic in respect to class, status, ethnic identity, and legitimation systems.[89]

The major subsystems of society which deal with differentiated adaptation are the economy and science. From these religion has retreated noticeably. The polity stands midway between the institutions of integration and the institutions of adaptation. Polities both create and maintain order and adapt expediently when the situation demands. Mol indicates, thereby, reasons why religion has greater affinities with the political order than with economics. The complete secularity of the political order is less to be expected than that of the economic sphere. Mol's contribution to the discussion is to force us to make critical distinctions about privatization and the secularization of the social order. For some institutions of society—not just the family, but class and status systems, ethnic groups—religion seems to have increased its impact in modern differentiated societies. Its relation to the polity remains durable. Only in the arenas of the economy, science, and technology has the impact of religion noticeably decreased.

Column D treats the cultural level and secularization. The majority of authors who deal with this question assume with Clifford Geertz—although they are not always as modest as he is in their claims—that the proposition that there is no human society in which

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[88] Mol, *Identity* 263.
[89] For the argument and evidence, cf. ibid. 134–40.

cultural patterns we can, under the present definition of one like it, call religious are totally lacking is probably true (though on present evidence unprovable).[90] Only four sociologists in the group clearly claim that cultures are more secular than previously.

Column E includes the issue of greatest contention, whether institutional religion is on the decline in the West. Most authors either think it is or remain somewhat hesitant on the question. Greeley shows some ambiguity on the issue. Although in his *Unsecular Man* he denies that institutional religion is on the decline, in other works he has shown marked declines in the impact of Roman Catholicism in America. Nowhere does he assert or demonstrate that this Catholic decline is compensated in the growth of other organized churches. Both Bellah and Parsons are also ambiguous in their assessment of the institutional strength of the churches.[91]

A refutation of the secularization thesis is not necessarily a hopeful sign for the churches. These no longer possess a monopoly on religion. Much of the sacred is found outside their borders. The situation of the institutional churches is somewhat complex, since some churches—the conservative evangelical groups—are growing apace. Many suggest that their growth occurs precisely because they are more efficient at providing a firm and stable identity and sense of belonging than the mainline churches; they are bulwarks against the eroding dangers of pluralism. This point was first made strongly by Gerard Lenski in his path-breaking empirical study of religion in Detroit, *The Religious Factor*. Lenski saw that churches which were more like communities than formal associations generated deeper loyalties and commitment. Lenski argues that a strong sense of belonging may be much more important than belief in drawing members to a church.[92] Greeley and Mol substantiate the same point.

Hans Mol is once again a helpful interpreter when he asserts that what is usually called secularization is really "the outcome of differentiations exceeding the capacity of religious organizations to integrate them in the traditional frame of reference, with the result that, on all levels, identities and systems of meaning are becoming sacralized by agencies other than these organizations."[93] The sacred is not declining; it is shifting its locus. Study of new religions and of new forms of religiosity becomes essential to understand this shift in locus.

[90] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* 109.

[91] For a recent statement by Bellah on this point, cf. "Faith Communities Challenge—and Are Challenged by—the Changing World Order," in Joseph Gremillion and William Ryan, eds., *World Faiths and the New World Order* (Washington, D.C.: Interreligious Peace Colloquium, 1978) 158–59.

[92] Gerard Lenski, *The Religious Factor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961). A similar point is made by Glock *et al., To Comfort and to Challenge* 60–74.

[93] Mol, *Identity* 4–5.

Column F shows that, with one exception, Roland Robertson, all authors who note the strongly ideological assumptions latent in the secularization thesis tend to reject it outright—at least, extreme versions of it. To the best of my knowledge, no one has written about ideological elements in those who argue, with Greeley, that religion is an anthropological and social universal.

Table 2 returns to the fifteen authors to uncover the areas of agreement which exist among those who champion and those who oppose the secularization thesis. These constants, rather than the dubious and equivocal concept of secularization, might better exhibit the situation for modern faith. Table 2 shows a striking convergence among the authors in pointing to what has changed in modern religion.

In column A we see that all of the authors note that modern society is much more pluralistic than earlier societies, although the different sociologists evaluate this phenomenon variously. While for Wilson, Luckmann, Berger, O'Dea, and Robertson, pluralism is a prolegomenon to secularization, others accept the assertion of Bellah that in modern pluralistic societies "it is not that life has become a 'one possibility thing' but that it has become an infinite possibility thing."[94] The implications of this new pluralism for the situation of modern faith are multiple. I can only hint at some of them here. Doctrinal uniformity becomes more difficult to maintain. New hybrid crossovers between Christianity and Zen or Hinduism become radically possible. Traditionally, religions provide a discipline or ascesis which channels energies and motivation by simplifying the range of choice. This traditional function will continue, although no one knows as yet the new ascesis which will both celebrate the situation in which life becomes a multipossible thing and channel motivation to avoid cognitive and emotional overload. The human-potential movement and Eastern spiritualities are widely hailed as new forms of ascesis. Classical Western spiritualities are staging something of a comèback. It seems unlikely that these spiritualities will maintain the selfsame ascesis as earlier forms. While the theology of spirituality is undergoing renewal, few have noted the social setting which has given rise to its retrieval—a pluralism that makes life a multipossibility thing—and the ways in which this new situation for faith will transform the classic spiritualities of the West.

Column B evidences a convergence around the claim that the churches have lost monopoly control over official models of religion in society and even over the individual religious impulse. As Bellah states it, "the symbolization of man's relation to the ultimate conditions of existence is no longer the monopoly of any groups explicitly labeled religious. How-

[94] Bellah, *Beyond Belief* 40.

TABLE 2

	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Pluralism	Loss of Control by Churches	Individual Autonomy	Identity Function	Privatization	Greater Institutional Autonomy
1 Andrew Greeley	+		+	+	?	+
2 Huston Smith	+					
3 Guy E. Swanson	+	0	+		0	+
4 Clifford Geertz	+					
5 Roland Robertson	+	+	+		+	+
6 Bryan Wilson	+	+	+		+	+
7 Robert Bellah	+	+	+		?	+
8 Peter Berger	+	+	+		+	+
9 Gerard Lenski	+			+		
10 Thomas Luckmann	+	+	−		+	+
11 Thomas O'Dea	+	+				
12 David Martin						
13 Hans Mol	+	+		+	?	
14 Talcott Parsons	+	+	+		+	
15 Charles Glock	+	+	+		+	+

ever much the development of Western Christianity may have led up to and in a sense created the modern religious situation, it just as obviously is no longer in control over it."[95] If religion has gained a new respectability in the contemporary world, it is by no means evident that organized religion will be the unique or primary recipient of the benefits. Various theological strategies have begun to cope with the loss of organized religion's monopoly status, with new ventures in dialogue and claims for "an anonymous Christian," "the end of mission," and Christianity as the extraordinary means of salvation.

A third area of consensus (column C) is found in the assertion that modern religion demands greater individual autonomy. As Greeley rightly notes, myths have become more explicit, rational, and personal in modern society. On his part, Bellah insists that all credal statements must allow of far-reaching personal reinterpretation.[96] Authoritarian religion based on rigid doctrinal or moral orthodoxy finds an inhospitable climate in the modern situation. Guy Swanson sees this call for greater personal autonomy as rooted in a new understanding of the world in which a hierarchy

[95] Ibid. 43.
[96] Ibid. 41.

of personal and institutional authority has decayed and in which a new authority of principle and of common task is latent and emerging. Equality before a common task and authority rooted in functional competencies are replacing accepted sacred hierarchies.[97] There are far-ranging implications of this new understanding for a changed interpretation of lay roles and the pastoral task of assisting the laity in what Swanson calls an arduous career of love and service. Most sociological research has shown how inadequately older conceptions express the role of the clergy: pastor, preacher, priest, parson, evangelist, missionary, cleric.[98] A new stress on the minister as enabler and on specific skills to facilitate responsible individual autonomy and authority under principle and common task needs to replace older views of the minister as a sacred hierarch.[99]

Column D expresses the insights of those sociologists, such as Lenski, Greeley, and Mol, who see that in highly mobile societies religion must supply unique functions of providing a vivid identity and strong feeling of community. The strength of genuine friendship networks and shared association more than purity of belief lead to strong commitments to religious collectivities of time, energy, money, and identification. There is a special challenge to churches whose parishes are often large, unwieldy audiences rather than communities.

Column E shows that the majority of authors accept some version of the contention that religion has become more privatized, less of a publicly available value and influence in directing or shaping the megastructures which largely determine the course of modern life. While Greeley nowhere explicitly assents to the privatization thesis, his account of what is novel in modern religion includes the decline of religion's influence on the megastructures.[100] Bellah's ambiguity in answering the question depends on a nuance which asserts, somewhat improbably, that there is a new great international moral movement of the young, who represent a latter-day embodiment of Auguste Comte's religion of humanity, seeking for social justice and a new international moral order.[101]

There is some evidence that organized religion is finding new ways to address the problem of the privatization of religion in political and liberation theology. There is also a sign of a new turn to religious resources to overcome the increasing impotency of a world political and

[97] Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 825.

[98] Ibid. 829.

[99] For an approach toward ministerial skills in enabling personal autonomy and responsibility, cf. John Shea, "Doing Ministerial Theology," in David Tracy et al., eds., Toward Vatican III (New York: Seabury, 1978) 57–69.

[100] Cf. Greeley, Unsecular Man 14.

[101] Bellah, Beyond Belief 226.

economic order based on purely secular warrant.[102] Religion may not be unique in experiencing the phenomenon of privatization. There has occurred a general failure of public imagination. Much of politics and the accountability for decisions on public issues has also been privatized.[103] The privatization of religion remains one of the serious challenges of the modern situation for an authentic faith.

Finally, there is general unanimity that at least some institutional sectors of society enjoy greater institutional autonomy vis-à-vis religion than previously. New autonomy should not be equated with secularity, since religion is more important for some societal institutions than before. The issue is less one of the diminution of the sacred than a shift in control, both control over the sacred and control by the sacred of other institutional sectors of society. As Bellah puts it, "what is generally called secularization and the decline of religion would . . . appear as the decline of the external control system of religion and the decline of traditional religious belief."[104] It is not clear that the churches have as yet devised strategies to replace the external control systems by new methods of internalized commitment.

CONCLUSION

My aim in this article has been to review the sociological literature to uncover its account of the situation of modern faith. To do so, I have turned to the debates on the secularization thesis. I have argued for the abandonment of the concept of secularization because of its conceptual confusion and incoherence, although I hold that some form of the secularization thesis, under careful definition, may in principle be capable of empirical test. I argue, further, that we replace secularization by an analysis in terms of the individual elements it covers in its catch-all concept. These were seen to be: pluralism; the loss of monopoly control by the churches over other institutional sectors of society and over religion; the rise of individual autonomy in religious matters; privatization and the institutional autonomy of the primary, nonreligious, social sectors. It would take another essay to explore in any detail the appropriate response of the churches to these challenges. While it may be true that "the modern world is as alive with religious possibility as any epoch in human history," few sociologists seem to think that the churches have gone very far in exploring that possibility.[105]

[102] Cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Divisiveness and Unity," in Joseph Gremillion, ed., *Food/Energy and the Major Faiths* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978) 71–85.

[103] Cf. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Random House, 1976).

[104] Bellah, *Beyond Belief* 227.

[105] The citation from ibid. 228. For Greeley's urging that American Catholicism face up to the task of exploring the religious possibilities of the modern world, cf. his *The New Agenda* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973).

Perhaps Swanson's utopian evocation of the role of specialized religious communities in the modern world in the new situation for faith can provide us with a guiding vision set by sociologists of the task for theology in renewing the church: "Religious communities must serve to remind all men and all organizations of their mutual incompleteness, to nurture mechanisms and an environment in which differences among them can be reconciled if not removed, to witness by their own faithfulness and inner life to the powers possessed by an embodied community, by objective justice and by incarnate charity: the powers to nurture, to elevate, to revive, to renew."[106]

[106] Swanson, "Modern Secularity" 829–30.