

Mission and the Challenges of Secularisation

Introduction

A few years ago, a small incident in a newsagent's shop in London brought home to me just how secularised Europe has now become. I was looking for Christmas cards to send when suddenly I overheard a schoolgirl, noticing one card depicting the scene of the Nativity, saying to her friend, "Look! They're even bringing religion into it now!"

That event, trivial as it was, struck me profoundly, and has often caused me to question how we think of Europe in terms of mission. Therefore, at a recent conference on Missiology, centred on the theme of the Five Faces of Mission in Five Continents, as the European face of that mission I decided to reflect upon the issue of secularisation. For it is a common perception that, of these five continents, Europe is indeed the most secularised.

How is the issue of secularisation in Europe relevant to mission in the globalised context? Despite the fact that Christianity was born in Asia, and despite its early expansion eastwards even as far as China, Christianity is still perceived as a largely Western phenomenon. It can even be said that although Christianity had its birth in Asia, it grew up and came to maturity in Europe. From about 1500 C.E. onwards, Christian expansion followed closely on the coattails of the voyages of discovery, allied first of all to the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, then to the centralised directions of Rome. Later on, other expanding European powers such as Great Britain and France would bring Christianity in all its forms to the four corners of the globe.

Therefore, Christian churches all around the world today owe their origins, in one form or another, to Europe.

Even though the European-centred empires are today a thing of the past and the emphasis is now on the "global village"; even though such countries as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are today enjoying their status as market leaders in many of the world's manufactured goods; and even though modern communications technology has shifted the locus of business enterprise away from its traditional base in the industrialised West, Europe, along with the United States, continues to exert a high influence on world affairs. Just as with Christianisation in the past, so too with

secularisation today Europe's influence extends far beyond its geographical boundaries.

This means, then, that what happens in Europe goes on to influence and affect the rest of the world in due course. Writing in the context of secularisation and secularism in India, Fr. Thomas Kochuthara states that, "Many see the phenomenon of secularisation as the main factor behind the progress of the West and the emancipation of that society from the clutches of superstitions."¹ Many developing nations, including India, have therefore tried to emulate this separation of state from religion as a means of furthering social and human development.

Even where such an overt course has not been so explicitly followed, the present-day realities of multi-national corporations, outsourcing, worldwide instant communication and other consequences of the globalised economy have had the inevitable effect of divorcing many, especially in the developing world, from their spiritual and cultural roots. What has happened in Europe is now happening everywhere. "Secularisation is today a worldwide phenomenon".²

The aim of this article is to explore the pros and the cons of secularisation so as to analyse the challenges it presents to mission, and to propose ways of engaging and dialoguing with an increasingly secular world.

What is secularisation?

Harvey Cox, in his introduction to *The Secular City*, quotes the Dutch theologian C.A. van Peursen as saying that secularisation is the deliverance of the human person "from religious and... metaphysical control over his reason and his language".³ Cox then goes on to describe it as "the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself... the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols".⁴

These then illustrate the two aspects of secularisation identified by A. Fonseca as "the *subjective*, pertaining to the individual person and his development into an

¹ Thomas Kochuthara, "Secularism and Secularisation: Theological Reflections," *Vidyajoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62 (April 1998): p. 239.

² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³ C. A. van Peursen, cited in Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

autonomous believer; and the *objective*, pertaining to the social structures in so far as they are disjointed from the sacred, assume their own spheres of autonomy and operate independently from, or unrelated to, controls of a sacred nature”.⁵

Secularisation is thus “the process by which religion is pushed out of its control of various spheres”⁶ such as human culture, education, medicine, the arts and sciences. These areas then achieve “a certain relative autonomy from religion, Christianity in its institutional form and sacral character, and [attain] a new and distinctive value in and for themselves.”⁷

Secularisation is not an anti-religious phenomenon as such. Rather, it “bypasses and undercuts religion”,⁸ relativising religious world views and thereby rendering them innocuous. Subjectively, it means that religion no longer provides for the individual any inclusive and commanding value system, or any explanation for personal or cosmic mysteries, these now belonging to the realm of science. Objectively, “the world looks less and less to religious rules and rituals for its morality or its meanings.”⁹ Humanity has become increasingly aware of its autonomy in its dealings with the world and with society in the political, social and economic spheres.

Origins of Secularisation

Harvey Cox posits the interesting theory that the progressive secularisation of the world is the logical outcome of Biblical religion itself. He points to a threefold desacralisation: of nature (the Creation story), politics (the Exodus story), and values (the Sinai Covenant story). This desacralisation is the basic pre-requirement for the development of natural science and the relativisation of all human values that lead ultimately towards secularisation.

⁵ A. Fonseca, S.J., “Secularisation and Evangelisation”, in Mariasusai Dhavamony, ed., *Evangelization, Dialogue and Development: Selected Papers of the International Theological Conference, Nagpur (India) 1971*, *Documenta Missionalia* – 5. Rome, Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1972, pp. 347-358.

⁶ Kochuthara, “Secularism and Secularisation,” p. 245

⁷ T. E. Clarke, “What is Christian Secularity?”, *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 21 (1966), 201-221, cited in Paul Kevin Meagher, OP, Thomas C. O’Brien, Sister Consuelo Maria Aherne, SSJ, eds., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (Washington D.C.: Corpus Publications, 1979), s. v. “Secularity” p. 3241.

⁸ Cox, *The Secular City*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

The Creation Story desacralises nature, separating it from God, and therefore relativising it. Thus, it represents a radical departure from the neighbouring Sumerian, Egyptian and Babylonian religious systems which held nature to be of itself divine. Therefore, nature, in the Biblical view, loses its mystical and terrifying hold over humanity, and humanity is thus in turn freed in order to use nature as a tool.

The defining moment of the formation of the Hebrew people, the Exodus, is seen as a massive act of “civil disobedience” against a duly constituted monarch – someone who would have been traditionally regarded as ruling by divine right. Thus it is a movement away from a sacred-political order and towards history and social change. It is the emergence of history rather than nature as the locus of God’s saving activity, and the development of political leadership based on merit, rather than on kings appointed by religious legitimation or divine right.

The Sinai Covenant’s prohibition against the fashioning of “graven images”, and indeed of all idol worship, is a prohibition against the worship of anything that can be made by human hands. Since Yahweh is by his very nature impossible of replications by human effort, any deity capable of expression by human hand in the form of an idol is by that very fact *not* Yahweh. Thus the gods of human creation are demoted and relativised, seen simply as human projections. This forms the basis of a “constructive relativism”, making possible the stance by which national, racial and cultural idolatries of the age can be put in their place.¹⁰

Despite setbacks in both Biblical and Common Era times, during which the Israelite monarchy, as well as at various times the Church and the State, attempted to absolutise its position, the mindset engendered by the Biblical notion of desacralisation, perhaps best summed up by the command not to make any graven images or idols, led slowly and inexorably to those value systems that ultimately influenced and shaped the Age of Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment finally brought to fruition and enshrined in the human psyche the seminal events described in the first two books of the Pentateuch. With its emphasis on progress through the power of human reason, as well as its relativisation of all value systems, the Enlightenment left a lasting heritage for the 19th and 20th centuries. It marked a key stage in the decline of the Church, the separation of the Church from the State, and the growth of modern secularism. It served as the model

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 19ff.

for political and economic liberalism and for humanitarian reform throughout the 19th-century Western world. The major ideologies of the 20th century in the West – liberalism and socialism – stem from the Enlightenment and share its belief that reason, and with it inevitably freedom too, will eventually prevail. The Enlightenment ideals of science as an undiluted good, popular education, democracy and progress have retained their appeal until today.

Secularisation: An Evaluation

Given our backgrounds, the fact that many who read this article are priests, religious, and those training for these vocations, and that many also come from countries in which the practice of religion in one form or another still plays a significant role in society, we may be tempted to dismiss the notion of secularisation as something negative. We have perhaps become a little too used to dividing our world into polar opposites: good and bad; black and white; profane and holy; sacred and secular. It is perhaps because we place upon the word “sacred” such exalted, positive and even divine attributes, that any word unfortunate enough to be chosen to represent its opposite inevitably suffers from a correspondingly strong negative connotation.

Positive aspects of Secularisation

Secularisation is not, in itself, negative. It has many positive values. In Europe, for the most part, we enjoy a life of relative peace, comfort and security. Education, caring for the poor and healing the sick, once seen as the natural preserve of the religious orders and of various other individual initiatives and charities, are now seen for the most part as primary responsibilities of the state. Through taxation and, with it, democratic representation in government, responsibility for the welfare of the weakest of society and the education of future generations becomes the concern of all, regardless of religion. Indeed, the whole notion of the “common good” is the fruit of secularisation.

Democracy, too, is another such fruit. The value that is placed on human autonomy and the power of human reason implies that those who govern do so not by “divine right”, nor by superiority of intellect, or by military or economic conquest, but by the mandate conferred on them by the majority of ordinary people. They can then hold their leaders to account, critique their policies and decisions through freedom of

expression and the exchange of ideas in open debate, and change their leaders by the peaceful means of the ballot box when necessary.

Most of all, secularisation means that there is no one particular set of values, nor is there any one religion or ideology that is imposed, either by social convention or by state law, upon the whole community. Each person is free to practise the religion of his or her choice, and free also to practise no religion at all.

Secularisation, following the heritage of the Covenant on Sinai allowing for no false gods, has allowed the human mind to be freed from the shackles – the idols – of religious ideology, or, from what we would now term religious fundamentalism. We are freed to explore, to experiment and to question.

Today, the benefits of such freedom include the advances in science and technology that have revolutionised the way we live our lives and the comforts we enjoy.

One of the reasons, perhaps, that we as Catholics and as religious have tended to see secularisation in generally negative terms has often been due in no small part to the Church's own often reactionary stance, particularly during the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, towards technological and especially social progress. Given the sheer pace of such progress during that era, this is perhaps not so surprising. However, it does betray a Church caught up in the absolutising of relative values, attempting to divinise human structures, not least being the political system of the absolute monarch.

However, it must also be remembered that “during the past 150 years... All too often modern political, social, and economic revolutions have meant the restriction or total suppression of religious freedom for Catholics. Thus, Catholics have traditionally seemed opposed to progress and human freedom because of their allegiance to religious values”,¹¹ especially in the face of emerging and often equally absolutist ideologies.

In the past 150 years, though, we have indeed moved on from the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pope Pius IX and the anti-Modernism of Pope Pius X. We are adopting a much more positive attitude to the world around us, and to the progress made in so many areas of the secular sphere. The Second Vatican Council, in *Gaudium et Spes*

¹¹ Cf. Meagher et al., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Theology*. p. 3241.

no. 36, directs Catholics to respect the relative autonomy of the secular world as having a meaning and value of its own.

Negative aspects of Secularisation

The effects of secularisation have not been entirely positive. Freed from the dependence upon norms, laws, traditions and values that were once considered absolute, human reason and autonomy can become a dangerous loose cannon. The same internal dynamic of reason, freedom and human autonomy that gave rise to the Enlightenment and its values also spawned, among others, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

Despite being motivated by secularisation and the ideals of the Enlightenment, many subsequent revolutions around the world have succeeded only in replacing one tyrannical ideology with another. Unbridled economic and industrial progress has given rise to huge social inequalities within countries, is contributing to the widening gap between rich and poor worldwide, and is causing pollution, affecting the quality of life and health of millions, as well as degrading the environment and doing unprecedented damage to the natural world.

One of the main dangers of secularisation is that it can and does lead to secularism – the view that completely separates God from creation and even seeks to deny the existence of God altogether. According to secularism, humanity can do without God, does not need God, or the adherence to any absolute norms or values or recourse towards any ultimate authority save that of human reason alone and faith in the human capacity to advance itself in the light of that same reason.

Even where it does not expressly seek to deny the existence of God, secularism can and does in itself become an absolute, giving rise to “ethical anarchism and metaphysical nihilism”.¹² These and other “-isms” seek to dominate and control in precisely those areas once dominated and controlled by religious and other ideologies. Thus, they stand in direct contradiction to the ideals of secularisation. Seeking to denigrate and destroy traditional value-systems, they usurp and absorb these same value-systems, distorting them in the process.

¹² Cox, *The Secular City*, p. 29.

Cox calls this “the adolescent phase of the relativisation of values”.¹³ Having rejected one ideological value-basis (usually the traditional Judeo-Christian one), there is still the lack of sufficient maturity to seek new bases for social consensus and a shared value-system based on plurality and the common realisation that no one group’s ideology or value-system is absolute. The recent controversy over the publication of certain provocative cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, and the subsequent violent reaction of some of the more militant Islamic groups around the world, illustrates something of the tension and dilemma currently facing humanity in its search for a new ideological value-basis in a secularised world.

Challenges to Mission

A cursory look at the European scene today may reveal a people who are apparently very consumerist, materialist and secular. Organised religion seems to play little or no role in the lives of most ordinary people. However, just to look on the surface would be to miss a great deal. Beneath this surface there is an enormous spiritual thirst raging in the hearts and minds of most Europeans.

Usually, it takes a tragedy, or an event of national or international significance to bring such spiritual yearning to the surface. One need only remember the public reaction to the death of Princess Diana to know that in times of crisis, when we are brought face to face with our own human vulnerability, we rely upon and need some kind of ritual. We need something to remind us that there is Something Beyond to which we can look and hope for guidance when we find ourselves faced with the forces that threaten to overwhelm us.

The phenomenal success, among children and adults, of the Harry Potter phenomenon, with its themes of magic, other-worldliness, moral choices and the battle between good and evil, provides a hint, perhaps, of that deep desire “to go beyond (one’s) accidental, empirical nature.”¹⁴ It is a desire to go beyond the secular reality and journey towards an encounter with one another, with the world and with a transcendent Reality. It is a longing to encounter an objective “something” that we ourselves are not. In our secular age, the call of the Transcendent is ever-present.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, p.121, cited in Thomas Kochuthara, “Secularism and Secularisation,” p. 248.

It is the challenge of mission to rediscover the proper role of religion by seeking new ways to communicate with the people of our contemporary, digitised era.

This means finding ways to speak of God in a secular fashion.¹⁵ This does not mean relativising God, or reducing God to simply one option among many. It means speaking of God in such a way that modern, secularised humanity can meet God afresh – perhaps even for the first time. It means shedding much of our traditional presecular concepts and word-images about God, and about Christianity, that once conveyed meaning to those of a different era and culture, but now no longer speak to a post-modern, post-Christian, and secularised humanity.

One of the most basic prerequisites for mission to a secular world is to recognise first of all that we are indeed living in a post-Christian era. We can no longer assume that people are familiar with and understand the traditional paradigms we have used up to now in proclaiming Christ and the Kingdom. We need to find new paradigms in our dialogue about God that take into account the plurality of structures in which modern Europeans (and, increasingly, others elsewhere in the world, too) choose and create their own roles and patterns of behaviour.

Writing from an ecclesiological viewpoint, Fr. Peter Hünemann says that “To give witness in a substantive way, the legitimate features of modern society must be allowed their moment in constituting the church as an institution *for the sake of the gospel*”.¹⁶ Only then can the Church be a visible sign of God’s grace. It is his contention that the Church, by remaining imbued with and operating from an obsolete concept of society, is failing to come to terms with modernity and is thus hindering the fulfilment of “its role as sign and sacrament of God’s salvific will for all peoples and nations.”¹⁷

Likewise, it is the task of mission to proclaim the God of Creation, Exodus and Sinai. In other words, it is called to encourage and facilitate the process whereby, in a pluralist world with differing value systems, members of society can aspire to a sufficient level of maturity so as to allow the peaceful coexistence of these value systems for the mutual benefit of all. It means recognising that all institutions, structures, laws and value-systems are *human* creations, the construct of a particular

¹⁵ Cf. Cox, *The Secular City*, pp. 211ff.

¹⁶ Peter Hünemann, “Evangelization of Europe?” in Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Mission in the Third Millennium* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

people at a particular time and in a particular place. To absolutise them is to idolise them, and in that way to create false gods. Worship of such false gods has in the past led only to wars, gulags, ghettos, inquisitions and crusades.

It is the task of and the challenge to mission to proclaim the Christ who points the way to the Kingdom. Jesus of Nazareth refused to absolutise human structures, laws and institutions. Instead, he proclaimed the coming of a kingdom that is beyond all earthly structures, and he lived out the values by which that kingdom would be recognised. It is through this sonship and daughtership in the Son that humanity is called to exercise that maturity necessary to live in a pluralised world.

Despite the huge advances of the past century and a half, it is clear that science and technology have failed to answer the deepest of human questions. Humanity is still engaged in the search for meaning, perhaps even more so now that the combined effects of industrialisation, secularisation and post-modernism have caused generations to become alienated from their cultural heritage, their social roots and from creation itself.

The challenge for mission is how to re-engage western, secularised humanity in the search for meaning – or, rather, to give it fresh focus. The time is ripe for a new evangelisation, speaking with the technology of the digital age, that addresses the search for meaning that surpasses all ages, that respects human freedom and autonomy, that is comfortable with and can dialogue with diversity, and that witnesses to the Kingdom present amongst us through quiet but persuasive example.

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