

Peter L. Berger

The Social Reality of Religion

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The Process of Secularization

Up to this point these considerations have been an exercise in very broad theorizing. Historical material has been introduced to illustrate general theoretical points, and not specifically to 'apply' let alone 'validate' the latter. It is, of course, a moot question in the social sciences to what extent theories of this degree of generality can be 'validated' at all and, therefore, whether they have a place at all within the universe of discourse of the empirical disciplines. This is not an appropriate occasion to enter this methodological argument, and for the present purpose it matters little whether the foregoing is considered as a preamble to the sociologist's *opus proprium* or is itself dignified with the title of sociological theory. It is clear, of course, that we would favour the more expansive view that would permit our considerations to be considered as sociological theory rather than as prolegomena thereto. In any case, whatever one's conception of the scope of sociologizing proper, it will be useful to see whether these theoretical perspectives can be of assistance in clarifying any given empirical-historical situation, in other words, to see whether they can be 'applied'. In this and the following chapters, then, the attempt will be made to look at the contemporary religious situation from a vantage point given by our theoretical perspective. Needless to say, no claim is implied that everything said here about this situation derives from our own theoretical standpoint. A variety of theoretical and empirical sources underlie our presentation. We would contend, however, that the foregoing theoretical perspective shows its utility by placing different aspects of the situation in a new light and possibly by opening up some previously neglected aspects to sociological scrutiny.

The term 'secularization' has had a somewhat adventurous history.¹ It was originally employed in the wake of the Wars of Religion to denote the removal of territory or property from the control of ecclesiastical authorities. In Roman canon law the same term has come to denote the return to the 'world' of a person in orders. In both these usages, whatever the disputes in particular instances, the term could be used in a purely descriptive and non-evaluative way. This, of course, has not been the case in the usage of more recent times. The term 'secularization', and even more its derivative 'secularism', has been employed as an ideological concept highly charged with evaluative connotations, sometimes positive and sometimes negative.² In anti-clerical and 'progressive' circles it has come to stand for the liberation of modern man from religious tutelage, while in circles connected with the traditional churches it has been attacked as 'de-Christianization', 'paganization', and the like. Both these ideologically charged perspectives, within which the same empirical phenomena appear with opposite value indices, can be rather entertainingly observed in the work of sociologists of religion inspired, respectively, by Marxist and Christian viewpoints.³ The situation has not been clarified by the fact that since the Second World War a number of theologians, mainly

Protestants taking up certain strands in the later thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have reversed the previous Christian evaluation of 'secularization' and hailed it as a realization of crucial motifs of Christianity itself.⁴ Not surprisingly the position has been advanced that, in view of this ideological furore, the term should be abandoned as confusing if not downright meaningless.⁵

We would not agree with this position, despite the justification of the ideological analysis on which it is based. The term 'secularization' refers to empirically available processes of great importance in modern Western history. Whether these processes are to be deplored or welcomed is, of course, irrelevant within the universe of discourse of the historian or the sociologist. It is possible, actually without too great an effort, to describe the empirical phenomenon without taking up an evaluative stance. It is also possible to inquire into its historical origins, *including* its

historical connection with Christianity, without asserting that this represents either a fulfilment or a degeneration of the latter. This point should be particularly stressed in view of the current discussion among theologians. It is one thing to maintain that there is a relationship of historical causality between Christianity and certain features of the modern world. It is an altogether different matter to say that, 'therefore', the modern world, including its secular character, must be seen as some sort of logical realization of Christianity. A salutary thing to remember in this connection is that most historical relationships are ironical in character, or, to put it differently, that the course of history has little to do with the intrinsic logic of ideas that served as causal factors in it.⁶

It is not difficult to put forth a simple definition of secularization for the purpose at hand. By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. When we speak of society and institutions in modern Western history, of course, secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian Churches of areas previously under their control or influence - as in the separation of Church and state, or in the expropriation of Church lands, or in the emancipation of education from ecclesiastical authority. When we speak of culture and symbols, however, we imply that secularization is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world. Moreover, it is implied here that the process of secularization has a subjective side as well. As there is a secularization of society and culture, so is there a secularization of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations.

While secularization may be viewed as a global phenomenon of modern societies, it is not uniformly distributed within them.

Different groups of the population have been affected by it differently.⁷ Thus it has been found that the impact of secularization has tended to be stronger on men than on women, on people in the middle age range than on the very young and the old, in the cities than in the country, on classes directly connected with modern industrial production (particularly the working class) than on those of more traditional occupations (such as artisans or small shopkeepers), on Protestants and Jews than on Catholics, and the like. At least as far as Europe is concerned, it is possible to say with some confidence, on the basis of these data, that Church-related religiosity is strongest (and thus, at any rate, social-structural secularization least) on the margins of modern industrial society, both in terms of marginal classes (such as the remnants of old petty bourgeoisies) and marginal individuals (such as those eliminated from the work process).⁸ The situation is different in America, where the Churches still occupy a more central symbolic position, but it may be argued that they have succeeded in keeping this position only by becoming highly secularized themselves, so that the European and American cases represent two variations on the same underlying theme of global secularization.⁹ What is more, it appears that the same secularizing forces have now become world-wide in the course of Westernization and modernization.¹⁰ Most of the available data, to be sure, pertain to structural manifestations of secularization rather than to the secularization of consciousness, but we have enough data to indicate the massive presence of the latter in the contemporary West.¹¹ We cannot here pursue the interesting question of the extent to which there may be, so to speak, asymmetry between these two dimensions of secularization, so that there may not only be secularization of consciousness within the traditional religious institutions but also a continuation of more or less traditional motifs of religious consciousness outside their previous institutional contexts.¹²

If, for heuristic purposes, we were to take an epidemiological viewpoint with regard to secularization, it would be natural to ask what are its 'carriers'.¹³ In other words, what socio-cultural

processes and groups serve as vehicles or mediators of secularization? Viewed from outside Western civilization (say, by a concerned Hindu traditionalist), the answer is obviously that it is that civilization as a whole in its spread around the world (and it need hardly be emphasized that, from that viewpoint, Communism and modern nationalism are just as much manifestations of Westernization as their 'imperialist' predecessors). Viewed from inside Western civilization (say, by a worried Spanish country priest), the original 'carrier' of secularization is the modern economic process, that is, the dynamic of industrial capitalism. To be sure, it may be 'secondary' effects of this dynamic that constitute the immediate problem (for example, the secularizing contents of modern mass media or the influences of a heterogeneous mass of tourists brought in by modern means of transportation). But it does not take long to trace these 'secondary' effects back to their original source in the expanding capitalist-industrial economy. In those parts of the Western world where industrialism has taken socialist forms of organization, closeness to the processes of industrial production and its concomitant styles of life continues to be the principal determinant of secularization.¹¹ Today, it would seem, it is industrial society in itself that is secularizing, with its divergent ideological legitimations serving merely as modifications of the global secularization process. Thus the anti-religious propaganda and repressive measures of Marxist regimes naturally affect the secularization process (though, perhaps, not always in quite the way intended by their initiators), as do the pro-religious policies of various governments outside the Marxist sphere. It seems likely, however, that both these political-ideological attitudes must reckon with basic societal forces that antedate the particular policies in question and over which governments have only limited control. This state of affairs becomes amusingly evident when we see very similar sociological data for socialist and non-socialist countries (say, with regard to the secularity of the working class and the religiosity of the peasants) used by Marxist observers as an occasion to bemoan the limited effectiveness of 'scientific atheist' agitation and by Christian observers to lament the failures of evangelism, to the point

where one is tempted to suggest that the two groups might get together and comfort each other.

We would regard it as axiomatic that a historical phenomenon of such scope will not be amenable to any monocausal explanations. Thus we have no interest in denigrating any of the various factors that have been suggested as causes of secularization (such as, for example, the pervasive influence of modern science). Nor are we interested, in the present context, in the establishment of a hierarchy of causes. We are interested, however, in the question of the extent to which the Western religious tradition may have carried the seeds of secularization within itself. If this can be maintained, as we think it can, it should be clear from our systematic considerations that the religious factor must *not* be considered as operating in isolation from other factors, but rather as standing in an ongoing dialectical relationship with the 'practical' infrastructure of social life. In other words, nothing could be farther from our minds than to propose an 'idealist' explanation of secularizing. It should also be clear that any demonstration of the secularizing consequences of the Western religious tradition tells us nothing about the intentions of those who shaped and carried on this tradition.¹⁵

The suspicion that there may be an inherent connection between Christianity and the character of the modern Western world is by no means new. At least since Hegel the connection has been repeatedly asserted by historians, philosophers, theologians, though, of course, their evaluation of this has varied greatly. Thus the modern world could be interpreted as a higher realization of the Christian spirit (as Hegel interpreted it), or Christianity could be regarded as the principal pathogenic factor responsible for the supposedly sorry state of the modern world (as, for instance, by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche). The notion that a peculiar role in the establishment of the modern world was played by Protestantism has, of course, been a matter of widespread discussion among sociologists and historians for the last fifty years or so. It may be useful, though, to briefly summarize this notion here.¹⁶

If compared with the 'fulness' of the Catholic universe, Prot-

estantism appears as radical truncation, a reduction to 'essentials' at the expense of a vast wealth of religious contents. This is especially true of the Calvinist version of Protestantism, but to a considerable degree the same may be said of the Lutheran and even the Anglican Reformation. Our statement, of course, is merely descriptive - we are not interested in whatever theological justifications there may be either for the Catholic *pleroma* or for the evangelical sparseness of Protestantism. If we look at these two religious constellations more carefully, though, Protestantism may be described in terms of an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality, as compared with its Catholic adversary. The sacramental apparatus is reduced to a minimum and, even there, divested of its more numinous qualities. The miracle of the mass disappears altogether. Less routine miracles, if not denied altogether, lose all real significance for the religious life. The immense network of intercession that unites the Catholic in this world with the saints and, indeed, with all departed souls disappears as well. Protestantism ceased praying for the dead. At the risk of some simplification, it can be said that Protestantism divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and most powerful concomitants of the sacred - mystery, miracle, and magic. This process has been aptly caught in the phrase 'disenchantment of the world'.¹⁷ The Protestant believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces. Reality is polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically 'fallen' humanity that, *ipso facto*, is devoid of sacred qualities. Between them lies an altogether 'natural' universe, God's creation to be sure, but in itself bereft of numinosity. In other words, the radical transcendence of God confronts a universe of radical immanence, of 'closedness' to the sacred. Religiously speaking, the world becomes very lonely indeed.

The Catholic lives in a world in which the sacred is mediated to him through a variety of channels - the sacraments of the Church, the intercession of the saints, the recurring eruption of the 'supernatural' in miracles - a vast continuity of being between the seen and the unseen. Protestantism abolished most of

these mediations. It broke the continuity, cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth, and thereby threw man back upon himself in a historically unprecedented manner. Needless to say, this was not its intention. It only denuded the world of divinity in order to emphasize the terrible majesty of the transcendent God and it only threw man into total 'fallenness' in order to make him open to the intervention of God's sovereign grace, the only true miracle in the Protestant universe. In doing this, however, it narrowed man's relationship to the sacred to the one exceedingly narrow channel that it called God's word (not to be identified with a fundamentalist conception of the Bible, but rather with the uniquely redemptive action of God's grace - the *sola gratia* of the Lutheran confessions). As long as the plausibility of this conception was maintained, of course, secularization was effectively arrested, even though all its ingredients were already present in the Protestant universe. It needed only the cutting of this one narrow channel of mediation, though, to open the floodgates of secularization. In other words, with nothing remaining 'in between' a radically transcendent God and a radically immanent human world *except* this one channel, the sinking of the latter into implausibility left an empirical reality in which, indeed, 'God is dead'. This reality then became amenable to the systematic, rational penetration, both in thought and in activity, which we associate with modern science and technology. A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut. It may be maintained, then, that Protestantism served as a historically decisive prelude to secularization, whatever may have been the importance of other factors.

If this interpretation of the historical nexus between Protestantism and secularization is accepted (as it probably is today by a majority of scholarly opinion), then the question inevitably suggests itself as to whether the secularizing potency of Protestantism was a *novum* or whether it rather had its roots in earlier elements of the Biblical tradition. We would contend that the latter answer is the correct one, indeed that the roots of secularization are to be found in the earliest available sources for the

religion of ancient Israel. In other words, we would maintain that the 'disenchantment of the world' begins in the Old Testament.¹⁸

In order to appreciate this position one must see ancient Israel in the context of the cultures amid which it sprang up and *against* which it defined itself.¹⁹ While it would be erroneous to underestimate the considerable differences between these cultures (notably between the two cultural foci of Egypt and Mesopotamia), one common characteristic is the one that has aptly been called 'cosmological'.²⁰ This means that the human world (that is, everything that we today would call culture and society) is understood as being embedded in a cosmic order that embraces the entire universe. This order not only fails to make the sharp modern differentiation between the human and non-human (or 'natural') spheres of empirical reality, but, more importantly, it is an order that posits continuity between the empirical and the supra-empirical, between the world of men and the world of the gods. This continuity, which assumes an ongoing linkage of human events with the sacred forces permeating the universe, is realized (not just reaffirmed but literally re-established) again and again in religious ritual. For example, in the great New Year festival of ancient Mesopotamia the creation of the world is not only represented (as we today might understand it in terms of some sort of symbolism) but once more realized, made a reality, as human life is brought back again to its divine source. Thus everything that happens 'here below' on the human plane has its analogue 'up above' on the plane of the gods, and everything that happens 'now' is linked with the cosmic events that occurred 'in the beginning'.²¹ This continuity between the human microcosm and the divine macrocosm can, of course, be broken, particularly by misdeeds on the part of men. Such misdeeds may be of the sort we today would call 'unethical' or 'sinful', but they might also be of a quite different kind, such as in the breaking of taboos or in the improper performance of sacred ceremonies. In such cases the cosmic order has been 'wronged' - and must again be 'righted' by the appropriate ritual and moral acts. For example, disobedience to the god-king of Egypt is not only a

political or ethical malfeasance, but a disturbance of the cosmic order of things (expressed as *ma'at* by the Egyptians) that may affect the annual flooding of the Nile as much as the proper functioning of social relations or the safety of the frontiers - its 'correction', then, is not only a matter of just punishment of the malfeasant but of the re-establishment of the proper relationship between the land of Egypt and the cosmic order on which it rests. To use two terms discussed previously, human affairs are on-goingly nomized by means of cosmization, that is, by being brought back into the cosmic order outside of which there is nothing but chaos.²²

One point that should be strongly emphasized is that this sort of universe is one of great security for the individual. Put negatively, it is a universe furnishing highly effective barriers against anomy. This does not mean at all that nothing terrible could happen to the individual or that he is guaranteed perennial happiness. It does mean that whatever happens, however terrible, *makes sense* to him by being related to the ultimate meaning of things. Only if this point is grasped can one understand the persistent attractiveness of the various versions of this world view to the Israelites, even long after their own religious development had decisively broken with it. Thus, for instance, it would be very misleading to think that the persistent attraction of sacred prostitution (against which the spokesmen of Yahweh thundered for centuries) was a matter of mundane lust. After all, we may assume that there were plenty of non-sacred prostitutes around (to which, it seems, Yahweh's objections were minimal). The attraction rather lay in an altogether religious desire, namely in the nostalgia for the continuity between man and the cosmos that was sacramentally mediated by sacred sexuality.

It is profoundly significant that the traditions later incorporated in the canon of the Old Testament interpreted the origins of Israel as a *double* exodus - the patriarchs' exodus from Mesopotamia and the great exodus from Egypt under Moses. This prototypical Israelite exodus was not just a geographical or political movement. Rather, it constituted a break with an entire universe. At the heart of the religion of ancient Israel lies the

vehement repudiation of both the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian versions of cosmic order, a repudiation that was, of course, extended to the pre-Israelite indigenous culture of Syria-Palestine. The 'fleshpots of Egypt', from which Yahweh led Israel into the desert, stood above all for the security of the cosmic order in which Egyptian culture was rooted. Israel defined itself as separation from that cosmic unity that the Memphite Theology (in many ways the *magna charta* of Egyptian civilization) identified with the divinity Ptah - 'for everything came forth from him, nourishment and provisions, the offerings of the gods, and every good thing'.²³ This great denial of Israelite religion may be analysed in terms of three pervasive motifs - transcendentalization, historization, and the rationalization of ethics.²⁴

The Old Testament posits a God who stands *outside* the cosmos, which is his creation but which he confronts and does not permeate. It is not very easy to decide at what point in the religious development of ancient Israel there emerged that conception of God which we now associate with Judeo-Christian monotheism. By the eighth century, at the very latest, we find that conception fully developed and radically divergent from the general religious conceptions of the ancient Near East. This God is radically transcendent, not to be identified with any natural or human phenomena. He is not only the creator of the world but the *only* God - if not the only one in existence, at any rate the only one who mattered for Israel. He appears without mates or offspring, unaccompanied by a pantheon of any sort. Furthermore, this God acts historically rather than cosmically, particularly though not exclusively in the history of Israel, and he is a God of radical ethical demands. But even if we cannot completely identify the earlier Israelite conceptions of its God with the one we find expressed by Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah in the eighth century, there are certain features that it apparently possessed from the earliest times, probably antedating the coming of the Israelite tribes to Palestine. Yahweh, whatever he may have been before his 'adoption' by Israel (a process that, of course, Israel viewed *as its* adoption by him), was for Israel a God from far

away. He was not a local or tribal divinity 'naturally' connected with Israel, but a God linked to Israel 'artificially', that is, historically. This linkage was established by the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, a relationship that entailed very specific obligations for Israel and one that could be abrogated if these obligations were not fulfilled (*that*, indeed, was the terrible message of eighth-century prophecy). Yahweh was consequently a 'mobile' God, who could not be tied down either geographically or institutionally - he had *chosen* Palestine as the land of Israel, but he was not tied to it - he had *chosen* Saul and David as kings over Israel, but the monarchy was by no means an institution of divinity in the Egyptian or even the (modified) Mesopotamian sense. This 'mobility' of Yahweh was well expressed in the portable character of the ark of the covenant, which was only 'accidentally' deposited in this or that sanctuary, but even when it finally came to rest in the temple at Jerusalem the latter could in no way be regarded as Yahweh's necessary habitat (with the tremendously important consequence that Israel survived the destruction of Jerusalem first by the Babylonians and then, in a different form, by the Romans). This God demanded sacrifice, but he was not dependent upon it. And, consequently, he was fundamentally immune to magical manipulation.²⁵

The radical transcendentalization of God in the Old Testament can be best seen in precisely those places where elements of extra-Israelite religion are incorporated. A good example is the creation story of Genesis I, which incorporates a number of cosmogonic elements from Mesopotamian mythology. However interesting these may be for the historian of religion, even a cursory comparison with the *Enuma Elish*, the great Akkadian creation epic, brings out sharply the transformation of these elements at the hand of the Israelite adaptors. There we find a luxuriant world of gods and their deeds - here the lonely action of the creating God. There the divine forces of creation spring themselves from primeval chaos - here there is nothing before God, whose act of creation is the beginning of all things, with chaos (the *tohu vavohu* of the Genesis text) reduced to mere negativity awaiting the actions of God. Even in the one place of

the Genesis account in which there remains the unmistakable trace of a mythological name - the *tehom*, the 'deep' over which there was darkness, a Hebrew cognate of the name of the Mesopotamian goddess Tiamat from whose waters the gods were formed - this has been reduced to an abstract metaphysical category. And, significantly, the Genesis account ends with the creation of man as a being highly distinct from all other creatures, that is, in emphatic discontinuity not only with God but with the rest of creation. We find here expressed very clearly the fundamental Biblical polarization between the transcendent God and man, with a thoroughly 'demythologized' universe between them.²⁶

The historization motif is already implied in this polarization. The world, bereft of mythologically conceived divine forces, becomes the arena on the one hand of God's great acts (that is, the arena of *Heilsgeschichte*) and on the other of the activity of highly individuated men (that is, the arena of 'profane history'), who populate the pages of the Old Testament to a degree unique in ancient religious literature. Israel's faith was a *historic* one from the earliest sources to their canonical codification.²⁷ It referred above all to a series of historically specific events - the exodus from Egypt, the establishment of the covenant at Sinai, the taking of the land. Thus the first known 'creed' of ancient Israel, the text now contained in Deuteronomy 26, 5-9, is nothing but a recital of historical events, all, of course, attributed to acts of God. It may be said, without too gross exaggeration, that the entire Old Testament - 'Torah, prophets, and "writings"' - is but an immense elaboration of this creed. There are almost no books now contained in the Old Testament that are devoid of historical orientation, either directly or by rootage in the historically oriented cult (the two clear exceptions, Ecclesiastes and Job, are characteristically very late). About one half of the Old Testament corpus is occupied by the 'historiographic' works proper - Hexateuch, Kings, and Chronicles, with other purely historical works such as Esther. The orientation of the prophetic books is overwhelmingly historical. The Psalms are rooted in a cult constantly referring to the historic acts of God,

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as most clearly expressed in the annual cycle of Israelite festivals. The Old Testament revolves around history in a way no other great book of world religion does (*not*, incidentally, excluding the New Testament).

It may be said that the transcendentalization of God and the concomitant 'disenchantment of the world' opened up a 'space' for history as the arena of both divine and human actions. The former are performed by a God standing entirely outside the world. The latter presuppose a considerable individualism in the conception of man. Man appears as this historical actor before the face of God (something quite different, by the way, from man as the actor in the face of fate, as in Greek tragedy). Thus individual men are seen less and less as representatives of mythologically conceived collectivities, as was typical of archaic thought, but as distinct and unique individuals, performing important acts *as* individuals. One may only think here of such highly profiled figures as Moses, David, Elijah, and so forth. This is true even of such figures as may be the result of 'demythologizations' of originally semi-divine figures, such as the patriarchs or heroes like Samson (possibly derived from the Canaanite god Shamash). This is *not* to suggest that the Old Testament meant what the modern West means by 'individualism', nor even the conception of the individual attained in Greek philosophy, but that it provided a religious framework for a conception, of the individual, his dignity and his freedom of action. There is no need to stress the world-historical importance of this, but it is important to see it in connection with the roots of secularization that interest us here.

The development of a grand theology of history in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is too well known to require elaboration here. But it is well to see that the same historicity pertains to cult and law in ancient Israel. The two major cultic festivals of the Old Testament constitute historicizations of previously mythologically legitimated occasions. The Passover, originally (that is, in its extra-Israelite origins) the feast celebrating divine fertility, becomes the celebration of the exodus. The New Year festival (including Yom Kippur), originally the

re-enactment of cosmogonic myths, becomes the celebration of Yahwih's kingship over Israel. The same historicity pertains to the lesser festivals. Old Testament law and ethics are also located in a historical framework, in that they always relate to obligations arising for Israel and the individual Israelite from the covenant with Yahweh. In other words, by contrast with the rest of the ancient Near East, law and ethics are *not* grounded in a timeless cosmic_order (as in the Egyptian *ma at*), but in the concrete and historically mediated commandments of the 'living God'. It is in this sense that one must understand the recurrent phrase of condemnation, 'Such a thing is not done in Israel'. Similar phrases of course, may be found in other cultures, but here they refer precisely to that law that was, historically, 'given to Moses'. It is on the basis of these very early presuppositions that the Israelite view of history developed, from the original faith in the election of the people by Yahweh to the monumental theodicies of history and eschatologies of the later prophets.

The motif of ethical rationalization in the Old Testament (in the sense of imposing rationality on life) is closely related to the two other motifs just described.²⁸ A rationalizing element was present from the beginning, above all because of the anti-magical animus of Yahwism. This element was 'carried' by both priestly and prophetic groups. The priestly ethic (as in its monumental expression in Deuteronomy) was rationalizing in its purge from the cult of all magical and orgiastic elements, as well as in its development of religious law (*torah*) as the fundamental discipline of everyday life. The prophetic ethic was rationalizing in its insistence on the totality of life as service to God, thus imposing a cohesive and, *ipso facto*, rational structure upon the whole spectrum of everyday activities. The same prophetic ethic provided the peculiar theodicy of history (as especially in Deutero-Isaiah) that allowed Israel to survive the catastrophe of the Babylonian exile, after which, however, one may say that its historical efficacy was 'exhausted'. The priestly ethic (which, to be sure, was strongly influenced by the prophetic teachings) went on to develop the cultic and legal institutions around which the post-exilic community could be reconstituted under Ezra and Nehemiah. The

legal institutions, constituting the peculiar structure of what then became Judaism, finally proved capable of surviving even the end of the cult following the destruction of the second temple by the Romans. Diaspora Judaism may be regarded as a triumph of rationality, in a specifically juridical sense. Because of its marginal character within the context of Western culture, however, it would be difficult to maintain that diaspora Judaism played an important role in the rationalization processes at the roots of the modern world. It is more plausible to assume that the rationalizing motif achieved efficacy in the formation of the modern West by means of its transmission by Christianity.

Needless to say, it has not been our purpose in the preceding pages to give a thumbnail sketch of Israelite religious history. We have simply tried to give some indications that the 'disenchantment of the world', which has created unique nomic problems for the modern West, has roots that greatly antedate the events of the Reformation and the Renaissance that are commonly regarded as its starting points. Equally needless to say, we cannot try here to give an account of the manner in which the secularizing potency of Biblical religion, combined with other factors, came to fruition in the modern West. Only a few comments can be made about this.²⁹

Whatever may have been the religious character of Jesus and his earliest followers, there seems little question but that the form of Christianity that finally became dominant in Europe represents a retrogressive step in terms of the secularizing motifs of Old Testament religion (a descriptive statement to which, of course, no evaluative intent on our part should be attached). While the transcendent character of God is strongly asserted, the very notion of the incarnation and then even more its theoretical development in trinitarian doctrine represent significant modifications in the radicality of the Israelite conception. This point was seen more clearly by the Jewish and Muslim critics of Christianity than by those standing within the Christian camp. Thus there is some justification (again, of course, in a purely descriptive sense) in the classic Muslim view that the essence of the Christian 'apostasy' from true monotheism is in the doctrine

of *hullul* - 'incarnationism', as the idea that anything or anyone could stand beside God, or serve as a mediator between God and Man. Perhaps it is not surprising that the central Christian notion of incarnation brought in its wake a multiplicity of other modifications of transcendence, the whole host of angels and saints with which Catholicism populated religious reality, culminating in the glorification of Mary as mediator and co-redeemer. In the measure that the divine transcendence was modified, the world was 're-enchanted' (or, if one wishes, 're-mythologised'). We would contend, indeed, that Catholicism succeeded in re-establishing a new version of cosmic order in a gigantic synthesis of Biblical religion with extra-Biblical cosmological conceptions. In this view, the crucial Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis* between God and man, between heaven and earth, constitutes a replication of the mimesis of archaic, pre-Biblical religion. Whatever their other important differences may be, we would see both Latin and Greek Catholicism performing essentially the same replication on this level. It is precisely in this sense that the Catholic universe is a secure one for its 'inhabitants' - and for this reason of intense attractiveness to this day. It is in the same sense that Catholicism may be understood as the continuing presence in the modern world of some of the most ancient religious aspirations of man.

By the same token, Catholicism arrested the process of ethical rationalization. To be sure, Latin Catholicism absorbed a highly rational legalism inherited from Rome, but its pervasive sacramental system provided innumerable 'escape hatches' from the sort of total rationalization of life demanded by Old Testament prophecy or, indeed, by rabbinical Judaism. Ethical absolutism of the prophetic variety was more or less safely segregated in the institutions of monasticism, thus kept from 'contaminating' the body of Christendom as a whole. Again, the starkness of the Israelite religious conceptions was modified, mellowed, except for those chosen few who chose the ascetic life. On the theoretical level, the Catholic view of natural law may be said to represent a 're-naturalization' of ethics - in a sense, a return to the divine-human continuity of Egyptian *ma'at* from which Israel went out

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into the desert of Yahweh. On the practical level, Catholic piety and morality provided a way of life that made unnecessary any radical rationalization of the world.³⁰

But whereas it can be plausibly argued that Christianity, specifically in its victorious Catholic form, reversed or at least arrested the secularizing motifs of transcendentalization and ethical rationalization, this cannot be said of the motif of historization. Latin Christianity in the West, at any rate, remained thoroughly historical in its view of the world. It retained the peculiarly Biblical theodicy of history and, except for those mystical movements that (as everywhere in the orbit of Biblically derived monotheism) always moved on the periphery of heresy, rejected those religious constructions that would despair of this world as the arena of redemption. Catholic Christianity thus carried within it the seeds of the revolutionary impetus, even if this often remained dormant for long periods under the 'cosmicizing' effects of the Catholic universe. It erupted again and again in a variety of chiliastic movements, though its release as a force of world-historical dimensions had to await the disintegration of Christendom as a viable plausibility structure for Western man.

There is another central characteristic of Christianity that, again in a most unintended manner, eventually served the process of secularization - the social formation of the Christian Church. In terms of the comparative sociology of religion, the Christian Church represents a very unusual case of the institutional specialization of religion, that is, of an institution specifically concerned with religion in counterposition with all other institutions of society.³¹ Such a development is relatively rare in the history of religion, where the more common state of affairs is a diffusion of religious activities and symbols throughout the institutional fabric, though the Christian case is not unique (for example, in quite a different way, the Buddhist *sangha* represents another case of such institutional specialization). The concentration of religious activities and symbols in *one* institutional sphere, however, *ipso facto* defines the rest of society as 'the world', as a profane realm at least relatively re-

moved from the jurisdiction of the sacred. The secularizing potential of this conception could be 'contained' as long as Christendom, with its sensitive balance of the sacred and the profane, existed as a social reality. With the disintegration of this reality, however, 'the world' could all the more rapidly be secularized in that it had already been defined as a realm outside the jurisdiction of the sacred properly speaking. The logical development of this may be seen in the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, in which the autonomy of the secular 'world' is actually given a *theological* legitimation.³²

If we look at the great religious constellations derived from the Old Testament, therefore, we find quite differential relationships to the latter's secularizing forces. Judaism appears as an encapsulation of these forces in a highly rationalized but historically ineffective formation, the ineffectiveness to be ascribed both to the extrinsic factor of the fate of the Jews as an alien people within Christendom and the intrinsic factor of the conservative impact of Jewish legalism. In this latter respect Islam bears a close resemblance to Judaism, with the obvious difference that it succeeded in imposing its conservatory structures not just within a segregated subculture but over an empire of vast geographical expanse.³³ Catholic Christianity, both Latin and Greek, may be seen as an arresting and retrogressive step in the unfolding of the drama of secularization, although it preserved within it (at least in the Latin West) the secularizing potential, if only by virtue of its preservation of the Old Testament canon (decided upon once and for all in the rejection of the Marcionite heresy). The Protestant Reformation, however, may then be understood as a powerful re-emergence of precisely those secularizing forces that had been 'contained' by Catholicism, not only replicating the Old Testament in this, but going decisively beyond it. To what extent the historical coincidence of the impact of Protestantism with that of the Renaissance, with its resurgence of the quite different secularizing forces of classical antiquity, was simply an accident or rather a mutually dependent phenomenon cannot be pursued here. Nor can we try to weigh here the relative effect of Protestantism as against other factors, both 'ideal' and 'material', in

the process of secularization of the last 400 years. All we wanted to indicate was that the question, 'Why in the modern West?' asked with respect to the phenomenon of secularization, must be answered at least in part by looking at its roots in the religious tradition of the modern West.

In terms of the general socio-religious processes discussed in the first part of this book, secularization has posited an altogether novel situation for modern man. Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals, but for broad masses of entire societies. This opened up an acute crisis not only for the nomination of the large social institutions but for that of individual biographies. In other words, there has arisen a problem of 'meaningfulness' not only for such institutions as the state or the economy but for the ordinary routines of everyday life. The problem has, of course, been intensely conscious to various theoreticians (philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and so forth), but there is good reason to think that it is also prominent in the minds of ordinary people not normally given to theoretical speculations and interested simply in solving the crises of their own lives. Most importantly, the peculiar Christian theodicy of suffering lost its plausibility and thereby the way was opened for a variety of secularized soteriologies, most of which, however, proved quite incapable of legitimating the sorrows of individual life even when they achieved some plausibility in the legitimation of history. And finally the collapse of the alienated structures of the Christian world view released movements of critical thought that radically de-alienated and 'humanized' social reality (the sociological perspective being one of these movements), an achievement that often enough was bought at the price of severe anomy and existential anxiety. What all of this means for contemporary society is the principal question for an empirical sociology of knowledge. Within our present considerations we cannot deal with all this except tangentially. The question, though, that we will turn to next is what the process of secularization has meant for the traditional religious contents and for the institutions that embody them.