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Secularization

I'll briefly mention the secular. Then I'll say something about secularism. Then I'll come to secularization. I'll say that the secular is good. I'll say that secularization is bad. That's the question Professor Calhoun and I assigned ourselves to answer.

The secular is the opposite of the sacred. Still, it doesn't follow that never the twain shall meet.

Secularism is a belief-system, a worldview, or an ideology. We can call it a philosophy only if we don't confuse it with science. There's nothing about science that requires a secular philosophy.

Must a secular outlook denigrate religion? It depends. For the Freud who wrote *The Future of an Illusion*, it does. For the Dewey who wrote *A Common Faith*, it doesn't.

If it's atheist, is it also *irreligious*? It depends. For the Feuerbach who wrote *The Essence of Christianity*, the move from theology to anthropology was the fulfillment, not the annulment of religion. The socialist-humanist psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm did not literally believe in God, but he pored over sacred scripture like midrash in order to discover a meaning for life.

On the other hand, it can't be said that *militant atheism* has fared well historically. Consider the failed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Or consider the celebrity trio, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris, who might as well enjoy the fifteen minutes they've seized.

Atheism is a parochial phenomenon, local in place, recent in time. Cast in the form of the Freudian metapsychology, it is challenging. Cast in the form of Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*, it lapses into the genre of the mass-marketed spectacle.

If some people say the opposite of what an Islamic or a Christian fundamentalist says, it doesn't mean they're right. *Scientism* is also an ideology, not science. And it is also fundamentalist: it is confessional and creedal to the point of being sectarian, yet it fails to grasp that confessions and creeds belong to a universe of meaning and therefore entail a hermeneutic dimension. As symbols, which is what they are, although saying so does not diminish their objectivity and reality, they require what Peirce calls an interpretand in the theory of signs. Inevitably, then, they require the self-aware recognition of their own historicity, their belonging to a situation, a language, a culture and an economy, their handed-down and taken-up character, their metamorphoses, their ongoing differences, and their countless deferrals. In communicative action, they require the presence of another than themselves under the penalty of solipsism; and therefore also non-identity rather than totality. But fundamentalism, the ultimate totalizing gesture, turns a blind eye to all of this. That's why it tends to violence.

And so like its religious counterpart, scientism is therefore also essentially reactionary. For the soul of reaction is the uncritical flight from questions about meaning, interpretation, validity, and justification. In place of these questions, it just knows the answer. It is oracular. When it is called upon to authenticate itself, it either pleads the fifth, or else by way of self-ordination it begs the question. Scientism, a masquerade of *a priori* knowledge, implicitly claims a metaphysical assurance in the very sense of "metaphysics" it otherwise derides.

But this metaphysical assurance is an ersatz metaphysics. The irony of its own meaninglessness has not gone unnoticed. A transitional figure in the history of twentieth-century

philosophy, W.V.O. Quine, offers a cautionary tale. He writes that "Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word....[Meanings] themselves, as obscure intermediary entities, may well be abandoned." But the abandonment of meanings for the desert landscape Quine prefers also entails his conclusion that "Physical objects...imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries" are merely "irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically to the gods of Homer." Quine prefers the "myth of physical objects" on the dubious grounds of superior efficacy. World-historically considered, however, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* seem to have enjoyed a somewhat more durable efficacy than the mid-twentieth-century logician, of whom the hindsight of mere decades reveals that he amounted to little more philosophically than himself a convenient intermediary between the bankrupt A.J. Ayer and the profounder Donald Davidson, who at least had the decency to acknowledge that "an intelligible metaphysics will assign a central place to the idea of people ...with a location in public space and time" and who live in a world where "there are events" such as the eruption of "Vesuvius in March of 1944" and Caesar crossing the Rubicon. The moral of the story is that the celebrity trio might have been better off by heeding Wittgenstein's advice concluding the *Tractatus*, if only they knew what an impoverished philosophical world lay in back of their manifestos, than by being frequent panelists on CSPAN and "Talk of the Nation."

Reaction, whether it is religious in form or pseudoscientific, is essentially uncritical. In either form, it attempts to inoculate itself against critique by way of an appeal to authority. But science declines to accept the authority confessionals would confer on it. The appeal to authority is blind faith, but the eyes of science are open, whether it's the science of physics or the science of sacred theology.

More disturbing and more intractable than coffee-klatch debates with Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris is the *lived atheism* of everyday life in societies like our own, a pervasive social phenomenon despite philosophy and also despite science. *Secularism* is a belief-system. In that respect, one can ask with William James what it is good to believe. But as Professor Calhoun defines it, "*secularization* is the process by which a culture becomes less religiously observant." In that respect, asking whether it is good or bad might be like asking whether it is good or bad that it snows in St. Paul in the wintertime. Here it will be said that secularization is bad. But before it's a thing that's articulate to itself, it's a process that's actually happening in societies like our own.

In Europe, hardly anyone goes to church. On the other hand, Americans can't seem to shake it off. Here too it will be said that it's a good thing to be religiously observant. But I'm sure you'll agree that we need to be careful what we mean by it. Kierkegaard pointed out that the meaning of being religiously observant in a society where religious observance is *not* in decline but even in ascendancy might not mean what it appears to mean on the surface of things, but something else entirely. And since in some quarters in philosophy it has become customary always to mention Nietzsche's name in the same breath with Kierkegaard's, we can also recognize that when the madman, carrying his lantern like Diogenes, comes down in the predawn hours to the village square, fronting the white-washed sepulcher, in order to issue his proclamation of the death of God, the most important thing he tells the churchgoing villagers who gather round in astonishment is that they do not even know what they have done.

As social and cultural critics, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche converge on their withering critiques of the leveled, flattened landscape of modern mass society. Nietzsche's last man is Eliot's hollow man. Kierkegaard's leveled social landscape is Eliot's wasteland. The High-

Church Anglican poet counts the pulse of diminishing vitality in the enervated social body, both sated and leaking like Calicles's casket. Husserl and Heidegger, each in his own way, take the philosophical temperature, approaching absolute zero, of the crisis of European sciences in a world from which the meaning of things has very nearly vanished.

Secularization is a social process before it becomes a belief-system articulate to itself, but it is also a form of *lived belief* where the sacred does not appear. Weber called it disenchantment. A disenchanted world suffers from its loss of meaning, a polar night of icy darkness, as well as the loss of its freedom to an iron cage. Once upon a time there was a form of society that shared the social bonds and solidarity of a coherent religious and metaphysical worldview, but epoch-making revolutionary transformations permanently altered the physiognomy of Europe. The sacred canopy collapsed. It's only one small token of collapse that today it's physics that is taken for the architectonic science when once upon a time it was sacred theology. But what is betokened is not the science of physics, but the philosophical suggestion of physicalism as the overawing way of belief. Physicalism in turn is the twentieth-century heir of the philosophical fumbling that ran alongside the sidewalls of the new physics of the seventeenth century, an outlook called mechanistic materialism, an icon of which is the execrable *Leviathan*, monarchist, authoritarian, dehumanizing, and misanthropic.

The Newtonian synthesis has been long since eclipsed and surpassed in the science of physics, but a fumbling sea monster casts a long shadow and it takes a long time to go down. Not only is there the metaphor of the mortal god to consider, a machinery of state that requires a singular mind and a singular will, the mind and will of the hive, but there is the metaphor of the machine itself, and not simply in the logic of bureaucratic rationality but also in cosmology. Thales was a hylozoist, Plato was a panpsychist, Aristotle was a hylomorphist, Augustine was a

trinitarian, Aquinas discovered that the act of existence is a personal subject. And then today when a biogenetic revolution coincides with an information revolution on the model of the DNA molecule as an information processing machine, which we must model in order to know who we are, the metaphor of the machine continues to assert its cultural authority, if not its scientific credentials. A computational theory of mind, not merely biological in nature but physicalist and mechanist by design, stalks the social landscape of thinking as if your handheld device were to start talking back to you face-to-face-like on your walk in the woods, or as if the nano neural net bot implanted in your brain were to become your best friend in the friendship that Aristotle called complete: my friend, another myself, an Ignatian unity of hearts and minds. Since a person cannot be a machine, however, neither can the world be.

What therefore is sacred? It's coming on half a century since Harvey Cox wrote *The Secular City*. But Catholics will want to remember John Courtney Murray too. This was the time of the Council. The watchword was *aggiornamento*, the open and loving embrace of the modern world. Longstanding defender of the principle and doctrine of religious liberty, Catholicism wouldn't have it any other way. And it won't be entirely idle to recall that Murray was an American Jesuit as well as a theologian of the Council, since the greatest theologians of the Council were Jesuits too, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. This isn't boasting. It's Ignatian spirituality, the charism of finding God in all things. The title of Rahner's doctoral dissertation, *Geist im Welt*, condenses an entire theology, Catholic in nature, and catholic too in the authentic sense of a genuine universality. Perhaps it was because there were theologians around like Tillich and Murray that the secular humanist Dewey would come to prize his own humanism religiously and to welcome rather than banish the churches from the public life of a pluralist, democratic society; a society that otherwise might find itself today condemned to the

banalities of the televisual soporific, delivering the essential secularized message by way of narcotizing cathode rays. For try to imagine Abraham Lincoln without the Bible. This is as unimaginable as Abraham Lincoln without Frederick Douglass. So then imagine the civil rights and other freedom movements without the churches, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the mosques and the synagogues and the humanist halls, with a message essentially different in kind.

There will be no restoration of theocracy. In fundamentalist Islam in one of its variants, it's a Taliban regime. In fundamentalist Christianity in one of its variants, it's dominionism. In Roman Catholicism, it's ultramontanism. These are noxious regimes and toxic forms of reaction to secularization. There is no answer here. But I speak on purpose of Catholics and Jesuits on the campus of a Catholic and Jesuit university because finding God in all things is a Catholic and Jesuit answer to secularization. It is neither fundamentalist nor reactionary. Rather, it seeks to be radically open to the unrestricted inclusive universal horizon of the many horizons of the universe of meaning and being. Such a radical openness in turn, I submit, would indeed make a mockery of the merely instrumental, technocratic rationality of a leveled form of society, the logic of the hive mind, the logic of the last man, a logic that can value nothing more dearly than shopping sprees on holidays in malls.

But then again my purpose is not special pleading for one partial view among many. My thesis is this. Secularization is disenchantment, with its crushing losses and anxious longing. Disenchantment tends in turn to a desacralized reality. A desacralized reality leaves us with nothing more than the flattened world of the machine. The atomists would then be right: there is only matter in motion (mechanical, electrical, a particle, a wave). The fundamental machine of the flattened world of the machine is a clock. A clock in turn spatializes time. Spatialized time draws no distinction between chronos and kairos. But the loss of kairos is the loss of religious

observance in the profound sense. All that comes within the sweep of the hand in the uniform measure of time is physical. But the philosophy of physicalism is false precisely because reality is sacred. It is measured by the sacred time of its passing, which we rest to notice, while a machine does not. Here is the reason I don't believe that I've begged the question in my own way. Physicalism is false. But it would take a person to know it. A person is sacred most of all. So Catholics take the time of the sacraments through life because reality itself is sacramental. A sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace. Invisible grace is all around us. Invisible grace is what we're in. The secular is in the sacred. The secular is no match for the sacred.