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143, 3. The Characteristics of Secularizationsm: the Cultural Background of Radical Theology

1. The notion of the Zeitgeist. The last 200 years of the study of history and of philosophy have made it abundantly clear that every age has its own fundamental mood. E.g., we speak of the Hellenistic mind, the Medieval attitude, the Renaissance spirit, etc. Such notions are possible and important in the study of history, despite the always interpretative activity they involve as to their origins, their high points, their demise, etc. The spirit, mind, mood, or Geist of any age is a deep, preconceptual attitude toward and understanding of existence which dominates and forms the cultural life of any epoch. It is not one given philosophy so much as it is the background, the foundation for all the philosophies of a given period, that which each philosophical school of one era expresses; it gives to all the cultural creations of an epoch that particular shape which makes them "of that time." It is pre-rational, pre-thematized, pre-conceptualized, often even unconscious. It is a set of operative assumptions behind reflective systems, embodied in these systems. It is a cultural mood, a fundamental attitude toward reality, toward truth, toward value characterizing every epoch. Within its terms every creative aspect of life, including religion and theology, expresses itself.

2. Secularizationsm and secularization. Secularization is a cultural and social process involving the gradual freeing of nonreligious social institutions from religious control and the establishment of these institutions in terms of their own autonomous principles, their own inherent values. It probably is most clearly represented in the desecularization of the institutions of education and learning through the triumph of the scientific ethics of inquiry over the traditional ecclesiastical morality of belief. But it finds expression also in the autonomy of

^{more or less}
of politics and law, ~~culture~~ art and literature, practical morality and ethical systems, from religious control. Practically all theologians of whatever stamp in our contemporary world acknowledge this process, and most of them even celebrate it as expressive of authentic Biblical faith. Even if they challenge the adequacy of a secularization model, they do not plead for a return to a control of these cultural expressions by ecclesiastical authorities. They may argue, as Paul Tillich does, that neither a heteronomous model of ecclesiastical supremacy nor the model of total cultural autonomy will do, but that both religious and secular cultural institutions must be understood in terms of a theonomous model which accounts more adequately for the lived experience within both institutional spheres. Only the most fundamentalist of theologians would argue for the subjection of such cultural institutions as education, politics, law, art, literature, and public morality to the ecclesiastical domain.

Secularity is something other than secularization, however, though the two are related. It is the fundamental attitude toward the world and toward life predominant in the last 200 years of Western cultural history, no matter how many different and even diverging expressions have embodied it. It is the Zeitgeist of modern culture. It is partly cause, partly effect, of the cultural and social process of secularization.

3. Social and institutional parallels to secularity ^{some}
- a. Technology and urbanization have paralleled an awareness that we are not dependent any longer on the eternal, changeless, given order of nature to which we must accommodate ourselves. Rather, the environment to which man adapts himself is composed of the ever-changing and relative arrangements of human enterprise. Man seems to have moved from God's

world to his own, from being the participant in an eternal order to becoming the creator of a relative and fluctuating order.

b. Social institutions, traditions, and customs -- state, Church, class, even family -- are no longer for him "given" unalterably by a transcendent authority which he must obey, no longer temporal expressions of a divine & eternal order, participation in which gives coherence & meaning to man's life on earth. They are rather created by historical, geographical, and esp. human forces; they are relative, temporal, "secular" institutions, not the sacred orders eternally willed by God for the world. Their rulers -- king, president, father, Pope, schoolmaster -- are no longer sacral, unquestioned authorities & models for all that man sees & knows. Cf., "He'd argue with the Pope." Who wouldn't?

c. Man has not found his world peopled with spiritual beings, nor even engineered by "someone" with human purposes & needs in mind. He feels he knows his mat'l env. only thru scientific inquiry, and this inquiry showed him that he & his world are the results of countless, strangely harmonious, but utterly blind causes whose fortuitous interactions produced his relatively benevolent environment & even his own admirable powers of life, love, & thought.

4. Contrast with mythic and metaphysical consciousness: Primitive or mythic man did seem to feel he lived in an eternal, sacred order which was the foundation for both what is real & what is meaningful. His religious symbols, myths, & rites were media thru wh. he could by repetition & enactment regain access to this order & so transform the chaos of profane experience

into the cosmos of the original order.

Metaphysics & theology defined rationally what myth expresses dramatically, and as they may be regarded as in part rationalizations of this original mythical consciousness of a divine order in which man must participate in order to be man.

The secular spirit in the extreme is the final dissolution of this age-old consciousness, in three ways:

a) what is real is only the profane, contingent, blind causes that have produced us, the relative social institutions in which we live, the things we can make, & our relations w. one another;

b) what we can know are only these finite, contingent factors we see around us. Valid knowing occurs only where we can directly experience, manipulate, test, and verify. Any "knowing" by poetic imagination, religious vision, or even rational speculation tells us more about our own psychological & verbal problems than about what there is.

c) what is valuable is not some far-off heaven, or a mystical union w. a transcendent reality, but a better life here & now, among men in this world.

This is a radically this-worldly spirit. Man can, and should, depend on no one or on no other beyond himself to continue in being, to know & to decide about his life.

5. The general characteristics of the secular spirit:

a. Contingency: what is, is the result of causes that are neither necessary, rational, nor purposive. Includes us, esp. since Darwin's studies. Gilkey: "more than any other result of

modern inquiry, his theory of origins seemed to displace man from his former setting within an eternal order, purposefully willed, & pictured him as the product of the blind law of selection combined with random mutations. Even we ourselves came to be included within the blind mechanism of matter.

"The essence of this modern sense of contingency is that the given is ultimately arbitrary, and consequently beyond the given there lies nothing, no ground, no ultimate orders, no explanation, no reason." Ho f. Philosophie manifestaciones:

1) Then linguistic philosophy insisted that only those statements that had to do with the given, with the contingent, were factual. And these statements were all empirical or scientific in form. The only way we can talk about what is real is thru statements based upon and confined to concrete, sensory data, verified and falsified in these data. All other statements are meaningless. Philosophy becomes talk about talk, descriptive analyses of the meanings of words. ~~Other~~ reflective thought is restricted to science and to analysis of verbal meanings and usages in ordinary commonsense language and experience. All cognitive thought that probes beyond the given is meaningless.

2) In empirical naturalism, contingency becomes an ontological, th. a logical category, as in lc of 4, but expresses a similar apprehension of the relation of thought to matter. Ernst Nagel: while there are causes for events, there are no reasons. Things just "are," and their being has no explanation.

3) In existentialism, contingency is not observed from the outside as a phenomenon of things, but grasped from within as the character of one's own

existence. Our being is "being there" thrown, but there is no thrower & so no reason for the throw.

Different fr. classical notions of contingency: e.g., in Schleiermacher, contingency was what gave rise the "feeling of absolute dependence" which characterized religion, but this contingency was a sense of being both caused and free, dependent and yet real and effective. In Thomism, contingency is that which is not self-sufficient but dependent on the noncontingent for its own sufficient explanation. While moderns may feel their existence in this way as they live it, this view makes no sense to modern thought, where the contingent is the simply given, the radically arbitrary.

The deepest intellectual difficulty for modern natural theology is provided by this modern view of contingency. It made increasingly difficult the starting point of any natural theology moving beyond the relative to the transcendent by an examination of universal characteristics or structures of being.

Interestingly enough, American naturalism did not find this notion of radical contingency as threatening as did European existentialism. In fact, the emotional differences between these two philosophies was immense, while the ultimate vision was the same.

b. Relativity and relativism.

- 1) Relativity: all that is, is pinioned within the flux of passage or of history, determined in large part by all that lies behind it, shaped by all that surrounds it, and to be replaced by what follows. There is no

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unchanging and self-subsistent substance, capable of existing in and by itself & thus exhibiting an essence undivided from and so unrelated to the other things that surround it. Nothing is absolute; all is relative to all else & so essentially conditioned by its relevant environment. The sole grounds of explaining anything is the system of internal relations to which it belongs.

Implications: change r. th. sameness and identity; process r. th. substance; becoming r. th. being; context r. th. innate individual capacities and powers. The being of everything is a process of becoming in a context, a changing result of the interactions or transactions of things with one another.

2) Relativism applies the doctrine of internal relations to thought and to history. Our deeds, our artistic creativity, even our thoughts, philosophical categories, and metaphysical systems are formed in part by our historical context and also by the fundamental social and intellectual forces of our era, and thus they are relative to their time and place.

Implications: not only to doubt the possibility of a transcendent and self-sufficient God, but even any concrete, sacred evidence of God's presence to his creatures, & thus the foundations of all religion. How can we speak of ultimate events of revelation when all swims in the relativity of time & thus when nothing is relative? How can we speak of the Word of God amidst the welter & variety of historical words in scripture? How can we speak even of the mind of the Church in this manifold of changing historical minds, each rooted in & directly relevant only to its own

epoch? ~~Finally~~ If all faiths and world views are thus historical, relative to their stage and place in general history, how can any of them claim our ultimate allegiance or promise an ultimate truth, an ultimate salvation? Is anything ultimate or absolute in nature or history? Can there possibly be any legitimately authoritative basis for religious belief in doctrine; any ground in experience for our concepts of the absolute or the sacred, any intelligible usage to language referent beyond the nexus of relative causes to their ultimate ground or goal?

If all that is, is to be understood in terms of the nexus of causes & factors wh. give it birth, then no explanatory factor unrelated to this interlocking system can enter in from the outside. Language about some ultimate dimension explanatory of the finite is ipso facto unintelligible w/o this framework.

- c. Temporality or transience, the becomingness ~~or~~ and mortality of everything, w/o dependence on that which is not transient. All is becoming, all is changing, and nothing else is real.

Implications:

- 1.) Many traditional modes of understanding deity, and esp. that associated with an independent, unrelated, changeless actus purus, are meaningless to the modern intelligence. Since Hegel almost every theology exhibits a view of deity as essentially dynamic, in relations, in process, rather than as essentially unrelated and static.
- 2.) Attention has been focused on patterns of development and process in time v. th. on

the eternally recurrent structures of existence. Thus we find the meaning of our history in patterns of development leading toward a future goal rather than in a reiterated participation in an eternal order established at the beginning of things: myths of progress and Marxist dialectic. We have become conscious of historicity, openness to the future, the creative possibilities of freedom, and the importance of the category of hope for the historical future.

3.) Christian hope has been reinterpreted in terms of political progress and eschatological expectation for a "new" in the continuing processes of time, i. e. in terms of ~~political progress and~~ a supratemporal end of time. But who promised event this?

4.) Divine eternity transcending temporal passage and correlative concepts of everlasting life, eternal judgment, and eternal salvation seem meaningless. Is it not even harmful to dull the prospect of our own death in this way?

d. The autonomy and freedom of man is the source of whatever optimism & courage the modern spirit possesses in the face of contingency, relativism, and temporality. It involves our innate capacity to know our own truth, to decide about our own existence, to create our own meaning, & to establish our own values. Contingency, relativity, & transience destroyed the "gods" who had determined man's life w/o his consent. Only a life lived in autonomy is creative & human. All external authority will crush man's humanity if his own personal being does not participate fully and voluntarily in whatever help that authority represents & in whatever creative forms his life may take. Moderns may differ in their assessment of this freedom (Marxists, American pragmatists, existentialists), but for all three

is the key to the realization of value. The implications for historic forms of religion & authorities & requirements are obvious, as well as for the notions of revelation (vs. autonomy & inquiry), divine law, and even God himself. If he be at all, is he not the finest challenge to my creativity as a man? (Nietzsche).

6. Christians as secular. We not only accept many of these attitudes, we rejoice in them & would defend them if challenged. We also have learned much that is good from this spirit: respectful tolerance, a humble spirit about relativity of our own standpoint, humanitarian spirit. But as we grow in critical acceptance of this spirit, we are also in tension with traditional interpretations of Christianity.

7. Concluding note: What I have been describing here is a cultural mood, not a philosophy. Any given philosophy will include only some of these notions, and even these with varying emphases and differently interpreted! But I have been trying to establish a Zeitgeist, so as to raise the question: how does one speak of God in such a cultural mood?